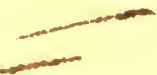






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LATE LAURELS.

VOL. I.

LONDON

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LATE LAURELS.

49

BY THE

AUTHOR OF 'WHEAT AND TARES.'

'Satis magnum alter alteri theatrum sumus.'

'Chaqu'un tourne en réalités,
Autant qu'il peut, ses propres songes;
L'homme est de glace aux vérités,
Il est de feu pour les mensonges.'

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

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LATE LAURELS.

CHAPTER I.

FORESHADOWING.

—— an English home ; grey twilight poured
On dewy pastures, dewy trees,
Softer than sleep : all things in order stored,
A haunt of ancient peace.

UNDERWOOD MANOR-HOUSE was regarded, not without reason, by the young people of the neighbourhood, in the light of a realised paradise. Boys liked it because ponies abounded in the paddocks, pointers and terriers about the yards and lodges, and all sorts of good things upon the garden walls. Girls liked it for its rambling passages, the mysterious splendour of its rooms, its quaint pictures, its cabinets of picturesque curiosities, the peacocks which strutted on the terrace, and the conservatory, where Mrs. Evelyn and an old Scotch gardener contrived

between them to make summer seem eternal. Boys and girls alike instinctively appreciated the hearty welcome, and the effortless hospitality, which awaited them on the part of the squire and his lady. Many a little creature, secure of sympathy and consolation, intrusted her first trouble to Mrs. Evelyn's ear, or committed some too audacious request to her advocacy and protection. Many were the fortunate lads who imperilled their own existence by futile attempts upon that of the Underwood rabbits; who invaded the stables, disturbed the pheasants, decimated the peaches, and, in fact, did all those pleasant things which gild the fancy of imaginative youth, but are for the most part objected to by country gentlemen, and the subordinate army of country gentlemen's officials. The Underwood grooms and keepers, however, were infected by their master's benevolence, and regarded all juvenile delinquencies indulgently, as a venial and interesting characteristic of the time of life. Old Marston, the absolute despot of the woods, all whose ideas seemed concentrated in a malignant detestation of hawks and weasels, had yet a tender side for aspiring sportsmen, and had submitted more than once with laudable resignation

to being 'peppered' by beginners, whose zeal got the better of their prudence. 'I be glad you're come, Jim,' he once observed to one of the beaters, who joined him at the corner of the plantation—'Master Charles have been pouring it into me most awful.' A special providence, however, preserved him and his leathern gaiters from annihilation, and Marston survived to reap a golden harvest, from a list of crack shots who had received their initiatory instructions at his hands. Thus, between master and servants, Underwood was a cheerful place; yet its cheerfulness resulted more from determined good-nature than from the absence of materials for melancholy. A sort of fatality had seemed of late years to hang over the Manor-house; the generation of Evelyns, which would naturally have been just now at its prime, was already extinct, and a party of grandchildren supplied the place and enjoyed the privileges of the missing sons and daughters. Time after time had the Squire entered the little Underwood chancel, as chief mourner for children, whose vital energies had seemed to fail them just when strength should have been greatest, and the prospect of danger the most remote.

One daughter, whose memory seemed now to her parents an almost unearthly dream of tender loveliness, had scarcely left the schoolroom, when she sank into a decline. Charles, the eldest son, frightened, while still in his honeymoon, by some unaccountable symptom of increasing feebleness, had carried off his bride to Italy, and endeavoured, under a sunny sky, to stave off the fate which he felt creeping pitilessly upon him. He soon knew it to be in vain, and turned homeward to die. For a while his widow lingered on at Underwood, the scene of her first love and her great trouble. Every one in the house, from highest to lowest, had a tender greeting for her little son, the inheritor of his father's name, tone, and manner; of the faultless temper which, Mrs. Evelyn declared, was the characteristic failing of all the males of the family; and of the good looks, which her nervous judgment construed into a warning of constitutional delicacy.

For a while the strangeness of her position, the poignancy of her grief, and the satisfaction of seeing her child duly installed as future possessor of Underwood, had reconciled young Mrs. Evelyn to the company of old people and children, and to the sober enjoyments of a country

house. Her own tastes, however, had been completely continentalised; and as her sense of loss grew less acute, the monotony of existence became less tolerable, and her own health afforded an excellent pretext for a return to those pleasant continental cities where her principal acquaintance had been formed, and her most congenial enjoyments were to be found. The young Charles fell easily into his father's place; became the chief interest of his grandparents, and startled them every now and then by some striking similarity in taste or gesture to what they remembered of their own son's childhood. His companions were two cousins, Margaret and Elinor St. Aubyn, the orphan children of the second of the Evelyn daughters. Margaret Evelyn had married a neighbouring clergyman, and had died shortly after the youngest child's birth. At Mr. St. Aubyn's death, a year later, both little girls were brought to their grandfather's house, were established in the schoolroom, where Charles was already somewhat refractorily submitting to the first rudiments of Latin grammar; and soon seemed, like him, with the readiness of childhood, to forget, amid new interests, pleasures,

and occupations, the home they had lost, and the misfortune which had befallen them.

Margaret, however, by no means in reality shared the indifference of her sister and her cousin. Her mother's death had sunk deep into her heart, and she still remembered with agonising distinctness the misery which it had cost her. She was endowed with a precocity for suffering, which her childlike playfulness, reserved language, and simple demeanour, prevented those around her from suspecting. She had seen too far into her sorrow, gauged it too thoroughly, and drunk too deeply of the bitter cup, to be content with the commonplace consolations which might have seemed naturally befitting to her age, or to be speedily aroused from the half-lethargy of grief into which her loss had benumbed her. She recalled the darkened room, the wan, scarcely distinguishable form, the wasted, feeble hand that was laid tremulously in her own, the longing eye, full of unspoken tenderness, the failing voice, that—half prophecy, half injunction—bade her supply alike to husband and child the void which, a few hours later, death was to make in the household. The charge, dimly understood at the time, had taken possession of her mind, had more and

more absorbed her thoughts, and had gradually become the ruling principle of her life. While her father lived, she had watched him with an eager fidelity, had tempted him from the solitude of his regret, and cheered him with abortive efforts at companionship, which would have been amusing, but that they were completely pathetic. At her father's death, the removal of one half of her responsibility made her but more keenly sensitive as to the other; and the superfluous devotion which most children throw away on pets or playthings, was concentrated, in Margaret's case, on a little, wayward, petulant, capricious beauty, who soon awoke to the privileges of her position, and realised the agreeable fact that at least one person in the house considered her happiness the chief end of existence.

Protection, however, is no step to complete intimacy; and Margaret's zealous guardianship placed her on an eminence above her sister, far greater than the few years which divided them would ordinarily have explained. It did more, for it effectually marred the enjoyment which her sister's society would otherwise have afforded her. Saint as she already was, she was still a child, and childhood has its prerogatives, which,

despite everything, it clings to tenaciously, and resigns at last not without regret, weariness, and compunction. Margaret at times, in her morbid nervousness lest harm should befall her sister, felt that a heavy burden weighed upon her spirits, and betrayed the fact by the buoyant cheerfulness into which her cousin's company at once aroused her. For Charles's indiscretions she felt no responsibility, and she regarded them accordingly with an agreeable mixture of terror, wonderment, and delight. There was a sort of fascination in seeing him break down the pale she so religiously respected, and trifle with what were to her inviolable mandates. Charles was a sufficiently naughty lad, availed himself to the full of the privileges of his position, and was troubled with no compunctious visitings as to the amount of inconvenience or annoyance entailed upon any portion of the household by his misdeeds. The Squire had once or twice been roused to actual wrath ; Mrs. Evelyn tried, and tried in vain, to impress him with the sinfulness of little sins ; and the housekeeper, fairly at the end of her endurance, looked upon him as a vessel of wrath, providentially designed for the disturbance of the Manor-house, the destruction of puddings

and preserves, and the complete embitterment of her closing years. All, however, confessed secretly that his heart was good, his truthfulness unimpeachable, and his delinquencies such as the future lord of Underwood had almost a right to indulge in. Margaret regarded him with an affectionate awe; she bit her lips, and opened her great brown eyes, and trembled with excitement, while Charles scaled the dizzy heights of towering elm-trees, set gunpowder volcanoes in a blaze of smoky glory, or brought a wild cortége of tandemmed donkeys to what Americans would call 'an everlasting smash,' in the haha of the park.

It was for these children that the festivity with which my story opens was designed. It was midsummer, and the Sandyford meadows were trim and glittering, still fresh from the scythe. The last cartload of hay had been safely housed without a drop of rain, and the Squire's overflowing satisfaction imperatively demanded an outburst. His youngest grandchild's birthday was an excellent pretext for some such unceremonious hospitalities as best accorded with Mr. Evelyn's present hilarity, the resources of his establishment, and the taste of the neighbourhood. Accordingly, in

the shade of one of the great lime-trees, which stretched from the drawing-room windows down to the river's side, a banquet had been prepared, and a great many eager guests were assembled. Mrs. Evelyn, already enjoying the privileges of an invalid, was ensconced in an easy chair, so placed as to command full sight of all that was going on, without exposing her too much to the tumult of the occasion. The Squire, who for forty years had been an assiduous lover, and whose old age had lost none of the chivalry of youth, found his way often enough to her side, and, resting awhile from his duties as a host, joined with her in quiet contemplation of the scene. With how pleasant a melancholy would their thoughts at such times wander back to the long period happily passed together, its brightness already tinged with the first gathering shade that told of approaching night! How long ago it seemed, and yet how near, that old, dearly beloved, half misty world, rich with remembered joys, griefs, anxieties, the common burden of both—the pleasant days of early married life—the calmer happiness of middle age—the dreadful hours of sickening hope or passionate sorrow—all now mellowed by distance, and borrowing a new

and tenderer grace from the feeling, stronger day by day, that it was not for ever, and that the end was at hand ! What a vista of pleasant gatherings under these trees, where a new generation of children were already at play ! Where was the old world, to which they belonged ? How natural that Mrs. Evelyn, as she sat with her husband's hand in hers, should find her eyes dim with tears, and from time to time a louder shout or merrier burst of laughter than usual should recall her from a reverie, in which past and present were strangely and sadly mixed together, and of which he alone would have been capable of appreciating the whole interest and pathos !

A goodly crowd was collected on the lawn. For an hour past juvenile contingents from all the neighbouring houses had been dropping in, and by this time the assembly presented a really imposing appearance. Charles, in the full splendour of a public-schoolboy's first holidays, acted as his grandfather's aide-de-camp, and with officious enthusiasm devoted himself to the general entertainment.

Nelly, in whose honour the festival was given, wore her mock dignity with an easy grace, and evinced a ready aptitude for the arts of queen-

ship. Her sudden changes of expression, and an occasional imperiousness of manner, would have told a careful observer that her reign, if good-natured and generous, would be liable to capricious fits, despotic impulses, and gusts of passion. Nature had gifted her, however, with a persuasive prettiness of manner. Already her grandfather pronounced her an adept in the arts of enlightened tyranny, and, appreciating both her pleasant and her haughty moods, and setting a high price on domestic peace and quiet, extended to her an indulgence that was not without its tinge of cowardice.

The feast had scarcely begun when there came a clatter up the approach, next the muffled sound of wheels and hoofs upon the grass ; a carriage, somewhat over-splendidly appointed, drove rapidly along the avenue ; a fine pair of greys were brought to a reluctant halt beneath the lime-trees ; a glittering, powdered footman sprang to the ground ; and in another instant the Squire, cut short in the distribution of a gigantic syllabub, hurried to help the new-comers to the ground, carried off Mrs. Vivien to a place of honour by his wife, put her husband in command of an end of the table, and found a place for her daughter

among the banqueters nearest himself. The Viviens had lately become owners of Clyffe, a handsome place some dozen miles away. As yet, they were not much known, nor altogether liked. They were wealthy, and made no secret of the fact; and the county in general resented an ostentatious splendour which it was easy to construe into an affront to the existing order of things. Mrs. Vivien's smart barouche quite eclipsed the ponderously-magnificent vehicles in which, for a generation past, the neighbouring magnates had exchanged visits of state, and the dog-carts and pony-carriages in which people made their way to one another on less ceremonious occasions. Mrs. Vivien, it was generally admitted, was fine to vulgarity. Her house was an upholsterer's palace, her jewels too profuse, her little girl was over-dressed, her liveries were gaudy, and the powdered heads and silk stockings of her servants were the objects of general contempt and indignation.

The surrounding landowners, each the undoubted lord of his own little principality, and guarding his prerogative with a jealous care, watched with a half-pitying contempt the efforts of a *nouveau riche* to outshine them, and greeted

Major Vivien at the magistrate's meetings with the chilling politeness due to an 'outsider.' The Major, however, had a longer purse, sharper wits, and more knowledge of the world, than themselves; and an emissary from the Carlton had put his merits so forcibly before the little knot of freemen who directed the politics of the borough, that Major Vivien, along with another Tory, had won his way to a seat in St. Stephen's, and had already begun to enjoy the increased dignity which such a political eminence could not fail to confer. Mrs. Vivien, though she resolved to shine, and succeeded in doing so, had little mortifications to undergo, which were none the less galling because they had to be entirely concealed. Heavyshire, as a county, unanimously resolved that her finery should seem misplaced and unappreciated. Nobody made the least effort to live up to her scale: the wife of the lord-lieutenant, in the shabbiest possible attire, drove two scrubby little Shetland ponies over to Clyffe, resolutely refused to be betrayed into London gossip, and evidently felt that she was being excessively condescending when she applauded the drawing-room cornices, and asked how much the carpet cost a yard.

Lady Dangerfield, whose husband was the Major's colleague, after ignoring her existence for six months, came at last, with a thousand pretty speeches, flattered her too grossly for belief, and concluded, with a great deal of transparent politeness, by a request that Mrs. Vivien should take her place as patroness of a Decayed Washerwomen's Institution, of which her ladyship made no secret that she was heartily sick.

Mrs. Vivien felt provoked, in spite of herself, when, at the best places in the country, she found the mistress of the house going with gruel and flannel to a poor woman's cottage; the gentlemen at cricket on the lawn, with an eleven eked out with garden-boys and grooms; and the young ladies either 'scoring' for their brothers, or busy, in garden-gloves and brown-holland pinafores, among their roses and geraniums. Nowhere had Mrs. Vivien been less successful than at Underwood; and, though the Squire's sincerity was generally unimpeachable, we may suspect that her arrival at the present moment was thoroughly inopportune, and the welcome she received all the more studiedly courteous for being consciously hypocritical.

Charles, less discriminating and more impres-

sible than his grandfather, was thoroughly pleased at the arrival; and the young lady, who was handed over to his charge, had every qualification for exciting a tumult in a schoolboy's heart. Florence Vivien had her mother's character written in her face, and something more. Her beauty would have been more agreeable, but for the assured confidence of her manner, and for the flowers and lace with which the skilful fingers of a French maid had somewhat too generously embellished her. She was strikingly graceful; but it was a grace which never forgot itself, and in which the dancing-master's services were unduly discernible. She had lived for years abroad, and always with grown-up people; accordingly, she was neither English nor childlike; and the Heavyshire ladies were probably in the right when they pronounced her vain and forward, *intrigante*, dressed not wisely, but too well, and, worst of all, a precocious flirt.

Charles—proud of his position as quasi-host, and cured by a single quarter at Eton of any indifference to the opposite sex—devoted himself zealously to his companion, was delighted to find that so ethereal a being could devour strawberries and cream, became talkative, confidential, affec-

tionate, and, before the repast was concluded, had agreed upon an interchange of Christian names, and boldly proffered his claim for the dance that was to follow.

‘You can dance?’ Florence inquired, already sagaciously distrustful of an incapable partner.

Charles’s education was happily sufficiently complete to justify an affirmative reply, and to secure him the wished-for boon. With the joyfulness of a first success, he led away his prospective partner to the garden, and proceeded to fill up the interval, which was to elapse before the dance began, with some of those sage remarks which older people than he have been known, under similar circumstances, to indulge in.

Florence was content with the size, comeliness, and dignity, of her admirer; and listened graciously as he became more and more loquacious. Presently they came to the flower-beds, now all ablaze with Mrs. Evelyn’s favourite roses.

‘Oh!’ cried the siren, already an adept in the conduct of a flirtation, ‘how beautiful—how very, very beautiful!’

Her victim caught greedily at the bait, chose a pretty cluster of buds, and encountered but the

faintest possible opposition, and soon found that his hopes were more than satisfied.

Florence affixed them skilfully to her dress; and Charles thought that never surely yet was neck so tastefully adorned.

‘Is it not lovely?’ she asked.

‘Indeed, it is,’ he said, fervently; but whether the flower or its wearer was in reality the object of the panegyric, must be left for ever to conjecture.

Presently the music began: four fiddlers, translated from the music-loft of Underwood Church, forgot, for the occasion, the habitual solemnity of their tones, and dashed heroically into a country dance. The Squire opened the ball in state with Mrs. Vivien, and set an example of alacrity which all were prompt to imitate. Then followed a valse, and the fiddlers surpassed themselves. Florence and her cavalier, with the inexperienced impetuosity of youth, soon danced themselves breathless, and were happily resuscitating themselves for the next dance, when Margaret came up, and reminded her cousin that he had been faithless to the heroine of the occasion. The valse had been promised to Nelly, and the homage she had received as queen of the feast made her proportionately aggrieved at the desertion. It

was in vain that Charles pleaded her diminutive size, his duty to their guests, his engagement to another partner, the abundance of little boys with whom Nelly might solace herself. Margaret was firm, Charles's conscience tender; and, at last, duty carried the day. Florence resigned him with a petulant indifference, nor did the promise of a speedy return seem to go far towards allaying her irritation. With an angry gesture she swept out her dress, flashed Margaret an angry glance from her grey, cruel eyes, and stalked away, like a ruffled bird, to conceal her resentment as best she might. Presently Charles hurried back, and found that his successor was already selected. Florence, the stormy look still lingering in her eyes, was helping an inexperienced performer through a very rudimentary polka, and seemed quite disinclined for reconciliation.

'*Je te rends ta rose,*' she cried; bringing her partner to a halt beside her, and handing him the flower, with a little disdainful courtesy.

'What,' cried the other, 'you won't have it?—why not?'

'Because,' said Florence, demurely, 'I love constancy, and you are a monster.'

‘A monster?’ asked Margaret, who was standing by them, and was already woman enough to long to battle for anyone whom she loved; ‘Charles a monster?’

‘Yes,’ Florence answered, warming rapidly into the quarrel. ‘And why, pray, did you want him to leave me?’

Margaret, for the first time in her life the subject of an angry speech, looked up in surprise at her companion’s eager tones, and at the commotion in which her spirits seemed to be.

‘I wanted him,’ she said, ‘to keep his word; dance with him now as long as you please.’

By this time Florence was again in the midst of the dancers, as radiant as ever; but she treasured up the fancied injury in her heart, gave it a niche in her memory, and paid it back, years after, with all the accumulated interest of a long-concealed dislike.

The dancers wearied; the fiddlers—their stock of secular music at an end—showed symptoms of collapsing into hymns; and some one called out for a change of entertainment.

‘A race for little girls,’ cried the Squire, ‘round the holly-tree at the bottom of the lawn. Everyone must have a colour.’

‘And I,’ cried Florence, looking down at her dress, ‘will be white.’

‘And red,’ petitioned Charles, offering her the rejected rose again.

Florence was in no unrelenting mood : she reinstated the rose in her bosom, banished her admirer’s despondency by a pretty smile, and stood eagerly watching for the signal to be off.

A dozen started : but a few yards sufficed to show between whom the race would lie. One after another of the runners fell panting towards the rear : and before half the race was done, Florence and Margaret had the field between them. Both were resolved to win, both heard the applause that greeted them at the starting-place : neck and neck, they strained towards the holly bush, which was the turning-point of the course. It was a thick, wide-spreading, veteran tree ; and whoever got safely round it first might look upon victory as achieved. For a few seconds the two were lost to sight : there was a moment’s confusion in passing ; Margaret, for an instant, was off her balance, at her rival’s mercy. A tiny push, dexterously given, threw her prostrate on the grass, and decided the fortunes of the day. In another minute, Florence flew in at the head

of the runners, her golden hair streaming wildly behind her—an airy goddess in a cloud of muslin—breathless, flushed, excited, but more beautiful than ever; and Charles, too much captivated to take notice of his cousin's predicament, banished the last thought of hesitation, and plunged headlong into the delicious delirium of a first love.

CHAPTER II.

LA BELLE DÉDAIGNEUSE.

‘ Yes ’ I answered you last night,
 ‘ No ’ this morning, sir, I say ;
 Colours viewed by candle-light
 Will not look the same by day.

IMAGINE ten years to have past away, and Florence to have reached the zenith of her beauty and the full scope of a vigorous intellect. She was twenty ; but she was old of her age ; and at a time when many young ladies are still immersed in the diatonic scales and the use of the globes, she had already seen much of the world, had formed a theory of success, and was thoroughly versed in the arts of fascination.

Her school-room career had come to an early and disastrous close. It had been a state of almost chronic rebellion. One luckless instructress after another had endeavoured to tame her into submission, had exhausted all resources of art,

skill, and patience, and had abandoned the task as hopelessly impracticable. Insurrections had been so frequent, peace so difficult to maintain, that it was a relief when the incapable dynasty came to an end. Florence always contrived to make herself out to be the injured party, and whenever she had been more than usually naughty, would come to her father, with tears in her eyes, to take the initiative in complaint. But the concurrent testimony of a number of dethroned sovereigns pronounced her volatile, distracted, incapable of self-control, greedy in pursuit of pleasure, but wearying of it almost as soon as tasted; on the whole, clever, but completely ungovernable.

‘I don’t like history,’ she would say, with a pout, whose comical beauty Major Vivien never could resist; ‘dates fly in at one ear and out at the other, geography gives me the headache, rule of three doth puzzle me, and practice—especially the practice of duetts with Madlle. Lafitte—doth drive me mad.’

‘On the other hand,’ her father would say, ‘you dote upon fine clothes; you are perfectly happy if you have got a man to manage; you are already a first-rate coquette, and you do precisely what you please with me.’

‘Don’t laugh at me, pray,’ Florence replied, with the air of a martyr; ‘you do not know what Mademoiselle makes me undergo.’

‘I am sure,’ her father answered sententiously, ‘you have a most agreeable and improving companion.’

‘I only wish,’ said Florence, vehemently, ‘that you had to go for walks with her.’

The Major was obliged to admit the cogency of the argument, and Mademoiselle Lafitte shared the fate of her predecessors. Florence remained mistress of the field, and plunged with eager exultation into the enjoyment of her new-found independence. Then came a London season, and she liked it better even than she had hoped; her mother’s tastes and her own coincided so far that each loved pleasure dearly, each knew how to turn her beauty to the best account, each found the excitement of society irresistibly delightful. There, however, the resemblance ceased. Florence’s character contained an element of nobility which made her an enigma to her parents, and disappointed all Mrs. Vivien’s hopes and calculations for her advancement. Everything conspired to spoil her; yet the promptings of a higher nature, never entirely silenced, from time to time asserted

their claim to authority, and though falling short of excellence, saved her, in despite of herself and her circumstances, from complete degradation. She was vain; and from her childhood up, her mother's devotion to the mirror had encouraged her to place dress among the first of feminine obligations. She was frivolous, and her life was perforce a round of trifles. She loved power, and all around her were adepts in chicanery; homage, and flatterers were only too abundant; amusement—and her parents made it the great end of existence. But the world in which they moved contentedly inspired her with dissatisfaction, weariness, and contempt. She felt it to be mean, and, though unconscious of a better, refused it any but a careless, occasional, and half-indignant homage. Her mother's enslavement stirred her to absolute rebellion; success was worth something, she thought, but not the price that people paid; fashion had its laws, but it was a petty despotism after all. Florence accordingly failed for want, not of materials for success, but of thoroughness of purpose. One day she courted applause, and forfeited it the next by some rash speech or word; she longed for friends, but frightened them from her by outbursts of sarcasm, or cooled them by a

negligent mood. Sometimes she dazzled, sometimes she shocked; now she bent herself to fascinate, now defied all customary rule, and startled the tame world around by some gratuitous outrage. Men hovered round her, wondered, admired, and sometimes in a credulous moment, putting their fortunes to the test, found Florence's heart completely unapproachable, and retired in wrath, humiliation, and discomfiture.

Two seasons passed away, and Florence was still unmarried. Her mother—teased by vagaries which she could not understand, and by the loss of opportunities which might not recur—made no secret of her displeasure, and upbraided her with her husbandless condition, as the natural result of her indiscreet behaviour. Florence indeed did her best to exhaust the patience of the vigilant chaperone who was bent on disposing of her advantageously. A momentary freak undid the work of months of maternal anxiety, and tumbled the painfully-built edifice in ruins to the ground. For half a summer she chased a little lordling with creditable assiduity; and, just when the game was in her hand, and her mother thought the victory won, threw it wantonly away, and scared off the astonished millionaire by an outburst of ridicule and dislike.

Mrs. Vivien was speechless with wrath, and even the Major protested at such a wanton waste of worldly advantages.'

'Prospective marquesses,' he cried, 'are not to be picked up in the streets, I can tell you; and even one of your rude speeches, Florence, is a little dear at fifty thousand a year.'

'Yes,' put in Mrs Vivien, 'and the Scamperly diamonds are beyond all belief.'

'Diamond me no diamonds!' cried Florence, refractory as ever. 'I have not the least aspiration for martyrdom, though I suffer in a coronet, and have half the duchesses in London to sympathise with my sufferings.'

'Martyrdom,' cried her father; 'fiddlestick! Lord Scamperly is as good as the rest.'

'Thank you,' cried his daughter; 'I am not fond of fops; and besides, he scarcely reaches up to my shoulder.'

'You are resolved to break our hearts,' said Mrs. Vivien, disconsolately.

'I have not the least intention,' Florence said, resolutely, 'of letting you break mine.'

Then the discussion ended; but Major Vivien had a glimmering conviction of his daughter's superiority to himself and her mother, and was

thoroughly frightened whenever she chose to put their proceedings in a ridiculous light. Florence's shortcomings, however, gave plenty of openings for retaliation; and her father—with whom Pope was the first of philosophers—used to declaim about the triviality of the feminine character, and to quote couplets triumphantly at her, whenever some unusually feminine characteristic made itself apparent.

““No thought advances,”” he would cry, ““but her eddying brain whisks it about, and down it goes again”—there is your portrait, my dear Florence, to the life.’

‘Those were the horrid women of George the Second’s time; and neither you, papa, nor Mr. Pope, know anything about us.’

‘You, at any rate, are inexplicable, I admit,’ said her father, as he moved away from the breakfast-table, where the discussion had been conducted, and settled himself, newspaper in hand, in a bay-window, commanding a full view of the glittering garden beds and the park beyond, hazy already in the glaring August sunlight. ‘How beautiful the country is!’

‘Yes,’ said Florence, in a despondent tone, ‘how beautiful—and how very, very dull!’

Her father threw himself back in his chair with a gesture of impatience, and burst into a contemptuous laugh. ‘Pope again!’ he cried. “‘O odious, odious trees!’ Of course, having led something like a rational existence for nearly a fortnight, you are *ennuyée* to death; I hoped, I confess, that you were too heartily sick of town to be so soon disenchanted.’

‘Well,’ said Florence, resolutely, ‘it *is* dull, you must confess; and, though we were all tired, one can get rested of anything in a fortnight.’

‘God made the country, my dear,’ observed Mrs. Vivien, who, when she deserted the congenial level of drawing-room tactics, plunged at once into a region of the most unquestionable platitude.

‘Yes,’ said Florence; ‘but who made the country dinners, and the Heavyshire archery meetings, and the county balls, mamma, and the militia officers, and everything else that is distracting? Suppose I have a bow and arrow like the rest, and enlist a string of rural admirers to pick up my random shots?’

‘Heaven forbid!’ groaned her father, whose recollections of a dinner party eight miles off the night before forbade him, in his heart of hearts,

to believe Florence altogether in the wrong. 'When you are in the country, for goodness' sake be a little countrified; cease awhile from flirting to be wise; forget that there are any men in the world beside the footmen, the parish parson, and myself. Visit in the cottages, teach in the school, amuse yourself in the garden. Last week I paid fifty guineas to your drawing-master; why should you not sketch the trees in the park? there is plenty of variety, I am sure.'

'An enchanting programme,' cried Florence, with an air of half-amused resentment. 'Let me see—trees, cottages, school-children, and a plot in the garden! *Merci, mon cher papa!* if that is what the country means, I am for the town, whoever made it.'

'We shall have a houseful next week,' observed her mother, latently sympathising with any complaint of *ennui*. 'Mr. Erle is coming, and I hope he will amuse us.'

'I hope he will,' Florence said, fervently. 'Meantime, I must take my choice from papa's list of dissipations.'

Florence's endurance, however, was not long put to the test: her mother had not promised in vain. September was at hand, and Clyffe began

to fill with guests. Major Vivien was a languid politician, and endeavoured by hospitalities in the country to atone for his senatorial shortcomings in town. There were supporters who had earned a little politeness, and Mrs. Vivien knew well the exact value of a prompt invitation; there were county magnates, with whom it was a point of conscience to exchange hospitalities; there were neighbours, quite disposed to take offence, whose resentment would be fanned into a blaze by an undue postponement; lastly, there were a number of stray bachelors, with the summer upon their hands, to get through at their leisure, who had walked the Clyffe turnip fields before, and were now anxious for a second opportunity of perdricide. Mrs. Vivien found her list of visitors swelling rapidly to an inconvenient length; Florence recovered her animation; and the Major protested that it was merely London over again, without the chance moments of peace and quiet which London life affords, and that he heartily wished himself safe back in Pall Mall.

First came a flight of provincials: Sir Agricola and Lady Dangerfield, and two young ladies, were among the earliest arrivals, and, as Florence told her father, had a very pleasant rural effect

about the house. Next followed the colonel of the regiment quartered at Sandyford, with a female train of dependents; next an idle barrister, who had defended the Major in his last election committee. Two days later Captain Bibo and Lord Scamperly, who generally travelled in company, posted across from the Duke of Pondercast's, and brought an agreeable aroma of political and fashionable gossip, which Sir Agricola and his daughters seemed equally to appreciate. Captain Bibo was a sturdy bachelor, who campaigned very jovially through life, was a formidable judge of claret, a first-rate shot, had an excellent digestion, and no conscience whatever worth mentioning. Scamperly was a naughty boy, who, ever since his dismissal from Eton, had been perfecting himself in all sorts of objectionable accomplishments. He was pale and thin, and wore a *blasé* air; and prudent chaperons warned their charges against him, as a very dangerous young man. He had, however, his intervals of virtue, and knew how to make himself agreeable in a country house. Some people thought him good-looking, and Scamperly certainly spared no pains towards becoming so. Joubert, his faithful ministrant, used to send him down in the morning, beauti-

fully arranged, curled, and scented, and hung about with pretty gimcraks, his little soft fingers glistening with precious stones and quaint devices, the rare result of many a Bond Street artificer. The Miss Dangerfields looked, hesitated, looked again, and felt their peace of mind irretrievably destroyed. That evening they severally confided their sentiments to their mamma, showed her each a lacerated heart, and resolved heroically to disbelieve that anyone so agreeable could be as completely unprincipled as people said.

Major Vivien, who at heart disliked a rural life as much as his daughter, piqued himself upon the art of reducing its disagreeableness to a minimum. He was not, perhaps, so confirmed a Cockney as the *roué* duke, who could think of no worse execration for the dog who bit him, than 'I wish you was married and went to live in the country;' but he regarded provincial no less than matrimonial existence as a necessary evil, which a sensible man should mitigate as best he could. His house lacked no comfort that the most exacting of visitors could wish for: his stables were well supplied; riding-horses and pony-carriages were at everybody's command; Gobemouche, the French *chef*, would have betrayed an anchorite

into greediness; and the cellars contained treasures of which even Bibo was compelled to speak with affectionate admiration. Day by day the party grew; night by night a larger tableful of guests sat down to appreciate the triumphs of M. Gobemouche's *cuisine*; and yet the Major felt that matters were going heavily. The Miss Dangerfields had sung through their list of duets, and were beginning, he could see, to tire Lord Scamperly with too assiduous attention. Sir Agricola had demonstrated to each new succession of listeners the inevitable catastrophe of a perfidious administration; Bibo's stories were running short; Mrs. Vivien showed symptoms of breaking down, and Florence was already in despair, when, to the great relief of everybody, it was announced that Mr. Slap had a couple of days to spare, and had graciously consented to spend them at Clyffe. The Major gave a great sigh of relief, and felt that his responsibilities as a host were at an end. He had a house full of people on his hands, but the new comer would, he knew, be a guarantee of satisfactory entertainment.

Mr. Slap was a Commissioner of Pumps and Fountains, and a great man in his department. Not half-a-pint of water went astray in the

metropolis, but Slap's eagle eye marked the delinquency, punished the offender, or discerned a cure. In Parliament he made a neat speech twice a session, was never at a loss for a telling answer to all inquiries, and irrigated the House, so to speak, with a copious oratory, which seemed as much at his command, and in as little danger of running short, as one of his own waterworks.

Mr. Slap's senatorial efforts, however, were nothing to his social and literary successes. From April to August he ate more good dinners, and said more good things, than any man of the day. Any stray witticism in search of a decent parentage, was affiliated unhesitatingly upon Slap, and helped to advance his reputation as a wag to the foremost rank. Great men—the very greatest men—asked him to their tables, laughed at his puns, quailed before the lash of his satire. Fine ladies condescended to gossip with him, and enjoyed the luxury of vicarious malevolence. No one, it was admitted, was more brilliant, penetrating, merciless, than Slap; and Major Vivien thanked his stars when, on coming down to dinner the next night, he found him already dressed and in solitary occupancy of the drawing-room. Slap, like an old campaigner, proceeded to make him-

self thoroughly master of the situation, found out who were staying in the house, what time the letters went to the post, how far it was to Pondercast Castle, which of the ministers were shooting there, and what was Sir Agricola's last theme for declamation. Presently the ladies began to assemble, the hungry sportsmen descended to reap the advantage of their morning's walk; dinner was announced. Florence was assigned to Mr. Slap; and the Miss Dangerfields, their thoughts for once abstracted from the object of so many days' pursuit, learned with mingled admiration and surprise how it was that a real London lion ate, drank, and—roared.

The day following, however, even Mr. Slap's arrival was thrown into the shade by that of Erle. He entered the house with the air of a man who was too confident of pleasing to be anxious about his reception, and who was too self-reliant to care for flattery. He was cleverer by far than the people amongst whom he lived, and his superiority betrayed itself by a sarcasm, which was all the more effective for being perfectly well-bred. A long minority had made him just wealthy enough to be idle, and the independence of his youth had trained him into a sort of social gipsy. An old

uncle, whose fortune he was one day to inherit, had discharged the duties of guardianship by keeping him over-supplied with pocket-money, and by securing for him the run of half-a-dozen Belgravian drawing-rooms, where good looks, audacity, lively talk, and satisfactory prospects, won him an easy success. Everything, so his wiser friends consolingly informed him, had gone so well with him, that only a disaster could rescue him from becoming completely contemptible. Erle himself was obliged to acknowledge that the stream of his life had run with uninteresting smoothness, and that he sometimes felt bored with invariable good fortune. At school, he had enjoyed the reputation, precious above everything in a school-boy's eyes, of being able to do anything if he chose, but of preferring occasional brilliancy to the steady lustre which necessitates the drudgery of continued application. At college he was the oracle of a little clique, who repeated his *bons mots*, admired his cynicism, and paid him the flattery of assiduous imitation. He sagaciously declined to enter the lists where eccentric book-worms and hard-headed north-countrymen rode, strong in the might of conscious preparedness, equipped with a formidable panoply of well-fitting

facts and figures; but he won some *éclat* by a neat essay on mediæval art, and established his reputation by a prize poem, in which his admirers hailed the coming laureate of his age, which his enemies pronounced pretty rather than forcible, and which he himself was the first to sneer at, as achieving the appropriate mediocrity of a school exercise. In London, he found that the sort of abilities he possessed were precisely the most available for the purposes towards which his friends' habits and his own ambition combined to lead him. He devoted himself, with more diligence than he had ever yet displayed, to being a fine gentleman; and easy manners, a ready tact, good taste, and an aptitude for gossip, smoothed his way to triumphs, towards which less fortunate aspirants struggled patiently, but in vain. Gradually, and in despite of himself, he grew into a polite impostor; nobody threatened him with detection; the imitation of 'thoroughness' was more than good enough for an indulgent *coterie*, and it was on the verdict of a *coterie* that success seemed at present to depend. He was politician enough to refute a knot of *dilettanti* statesmen, who settled the affairs of the nation (the wrong way, for the most part) in a bay window in

St. James's Street; artist enough to lay down the law to young ladies about the Royal Academy; theologian enough to convince their mammas of his orthodoxy; sportsman enough to waste a little fortune on thorough-breds that disgraced themselves at Epsom, yachts which brought up the rear of the Cowes' regattas, and hunters which gave him many an undeserved fall at Leamington and Market Harborough. Living for little but young ladies' society, he yet remained a resolute bachelor. Many a fair aspirant, as she watched his tender smile, and looked into his sad, dark eyes, believed that she saw there the secret that she longed to read, and that the prize was really hers. Next night the perfidious lips were whispering some sentimental confidence into another's ear, and the eyes, roaming about the room in search of some other beauty, scarcely granted more than a polite recognition. Experienced campaigners gave him up as a desperate case, and the old Lady Perspicax, who always saw everything, and had no daughters to dispose of, told him he was a good-for-nothing young man, and in honour of his impregnability, gave him the surname of Gibraltar.

Florence and he had met two summers before

in London, had frequented the same houses, danced at the same balls, and ascertained that they liked one another well enough to make the prospect of meeting agreeable. Florence thought him far better company than Mr. Slap, and Erle returned the compliment by speedily displaying an undisguised preference for her society to that of anybody else in the house. Ranging for amusement, he examined his new domain, reassured himself of Sir Agricola's stupidity, sipped a few drops of Mrs. Vivien's stream of gossip, asked Slap for his last *bon mot*, hovered awhile round the prettiest Miss Dangerfield, and settled down upon Florence as his serious occupation.

An easy country house, lovely autumn weather, an experienced love-maker, a beautiful and impressive woman, mutual inclination, favourable opportunity—what need to tell the result? Erle found the shady walks and pleasant garden seats at Clyffe far more to his taste than the crowded staircases and stifling drawing-rooms from which he had just escaped; and Florence, flattered by his homage, and for once thoroughly interested in her companion, startled him by a brilliancy and thoughtfulness of which their London intercourse had given him no suspicion.

He soon ascertained that he preferred riding with her to trudging about the stubbles; and Scamperly, who had been his fag at Eton, and ever since completely intimate, declared, over their pipes at night, that, disagreeable as Erle often was, he had never known him in so obstinately unsociable and cynical a mood as his present. All such protestations are generally thrown away; and the next morning Erle, who had hitherto put all the shooters to the blush, declared that he was too lame to go out, defended himself with languid deprecation against the charge of idleness, and confessed at last to being tired of partridges. Florence, who was on the other side of the table, flashed him a glance of intelligence across it, and interpreted without difficulty the almost imperceptible smile that assured her of his real intention.

Before a fortnight was over the inevitable catastrophe was evident to every good judge in the house.

‘Well,’ exclaimed Captain Bibb, as he and Lord Scamperly were settling comfortably down to a morning game of billiards, ‘I am glad of it. Erle has had a long run of luck; he is over head and ears in conceit and insolence—he thinks every

woman he looks at is ready to jump down his throat, if he will only open his mouth; and—that's twenty-two to love, Scampy; and a bad stroke even for you.'

'And what?' said his companion, gracefully poising himself on the tips of a little pair of glittering shoes, in the vain attempt to reach an awkwardly-placed ball; 'what is up now, Bibo, that makes you so savage?'

'Savage!' laughed Bibo, contemptuously, as he stopped short in the midst of an attempt to resuscitate a half-extinct cigar. 'On the contrary—never more pleased in my life. Don't you see, Scampy—but of course you're too young and foolish to see anything—but anybody with half an eye might have known that there will be a row here before the end of the week.'

'A row?' cried Scamperly, who, in the innocence of his heart, treated the other's superior sagacity with the profoundest reverence; 'and Erle in it? that beats me, I confess.'

'He is going to burn his fingers—'

'With that confounded Florence!' cried Scamperly, astonished, as the whole truth flashed upon him. 'By George! I hope he will, and burn 'em thoroughly, and like it as much as I did.'

Scamperly's wounded pride and sensitive feelings were still bleeding from the wounds which Florence's caprice had inflicted ; and better people than himself, with the recollections of Erle's sarcastic speeches fresh in their memory, might have found it difficult not to rejoice in his overthrow. But the prestige of success is as hard to lose as win, and Scamperly was still incredulous as to the possibility of defeat.

'Erle is a sharp fellow,' he said, humbly ; ' books, music, conversation—he's good at them all, hang him ! Look at you and me, Bibo ; what chance have we ? rank is all very well—money's a good card—looks go for something ; but with the clever women, it's cleverness that does it.'

'It's not cleverness with her,' said Bibo, sentimentally, as he screwed his ball neatly into the middle pocket ; 'it's temper—you are well out of her, my boy.'

'I wonder if she will have him ?' said the other.

'Have him ?' cried Bibo, with the greatest scorn ; 'not she ! she loves her liberty too well.'

As they were talking, Erle sauntered into the room, in an unusually cheerful, impertinent, and provoking mood ; he rallied Scamperly on a

stupid speech he had made the night before at dinner; put Bibo into a passion by offering to give him fifteen, and play him for a sovereign, and quite unconsciously prepared the way for an outburst of the latent hostility with which both players regarded him.

‘I shall be happy to play you,’ said Bibo, reddening with offended dignity, ‘on any terms you please; and, if you like, we will have the match after luncheon.’

‘Not I,’ cried Erle; ‘I am going to ride.’

His companions exchanged looks; and Erle, with the sensitiveness of a guilty conscience, saw that there was some secret between them.

‘Oh!’—said Bibo, with the air of a man to whom an entirely satisfactory explanation has been given; while Scamperly re-echoed the exclamation, with the most impertinent emphasis, from the other side of the table.

‘You seem to have a joke,’ Erle said, stiffly; ‘pray do not keep it to yourselves. Scamperly, have you been saying something funny?’

‘Yes,’ said his lordship; ‘I have been wishing you good luck on a journey where better men have failed before you. Bibo, there, thinks you will come to grief.’

‘No, indeed!’ cried Bibo, from the other end of the table. ‘*Bon voyage* to you, with all my heart!’

‘I declare,’ said Erle, more than ever provoked, ‘I am completely mystified. What on earth is the riddle all about?’

‘Hum! ha!’—cried Scamperly, in the most teasing tone; ‘what is it all about, Bibo?’

‘Come,’ said Bibo; ‘why in the world be so confoundedly mysterious? My dear fellow, we have all of us been made fools of in our time, and, though wide awake for your time of life, you are still young at the trade, you know.’

‘Upon my soul!’ cried Erle, in a passion, ‘you are talking Greek to me; pray be explicit.’

‘Well, then,’ replied Bibo, ‘we are glad to see that you have found a woman at last who can turn you round her little finger.’

‘And who will turn you off,’ cried Scamperly, ‘when she has had her fun, as she did me—bad luck to her!’

Erle, in the heyday of vanity and self-satisfaction, was quite taken aback by so unexpected an attack, and afraid to answer angrily for fear of seeming too much in earnest.

Bibo saw that he faltered in his reply. ‘Look

here !' he cried, 'you offered me a bet just now ; here is one for you—a hundred pounds to ten that Miss Vivien has rejected you, within a month from now.'

'Done !' cried Erle, almost before he knew what he was about ; for a moment's hesitation would have betrayed a seriousness of purpose which he had hardly recognised to himself, and which he was anxious above everything to hide from the rest. Did he intend to propose, and would Florence refuse him, if he did ? both uncertainties, and, while uncertain, fair topics for a wager ; so levity whispered in his ear ; but a graver voice told him that he had done a foolish act, and that neither pique nor vanity, nor the affectation of heartlessness, nor endangered prestige, should have betrayed him into a joke, natural enough to an old *roué* like Bibo, but unforgivable in a woman's eyes, and dangerously capable of a profane interpretation.

Erle was, however, enjoying himself far too much, and had, moreover, too hearty a contempt for Bibo, to be deterred by anything that had taken place from following wherever his inclination led him. While Florence listened with a pleased attention, while each day heightened the enjoy-

ment of intercourse with her, he could afford to neglect alike the sneers, wishes, and prophecies of the rest of the party. So followed all the accidents and gradations through which flirtation passes into love—long confidential talks, which the presence of a third party seemed instantly to check; new discovered coincidences of taste and judgment; bickerings, which were only the pretext for a closer intimacy; a growing shade of gravity cast on the usual merriment of both; interchanged looks, which told a world of secrets; accidental separations from the rest of the party; meetings, too fortunate to be altogether the fruit of chance; a half-avowed tenderness on Erle's part; a secret acknowledgment on Florence's; earnest protestations on the one side, feeble opposition on the other—at last, before either knew what was happening, a long, earnest, passionate kiss, and the next morning a formal proposal.

Between the two latter events, however, a third was interposed, which effectually spoilt the natural evolution of the case, and diverted two careers into an entirely new direction.

A secret escaped, and the discovery resulted in the first signal humiliation that Erle had ever yet received.

Scamperly, who had, after all, some conscience, and would rather have cut his fingers off than have broken any rule of honour, was the innocent cause of the disaster.

One evening, when the audacity with which Erle conducted his campaign had been the theme of conversation, Scamperly, in a moment of weakness, confided to the younger Miss Dangerfield the story of the bet. Miss Dangerfield, fortunate in the possession of an undeniable piece of gossip, passed it on to her mamma; and Lady Dangerfield, with the good-natured alacrity proper to the retailers of disagreeable intelligence, lost no time in disburdening herself to Mrs. Vivien. Mrs. Vivien treated the matter with affected indifference, thanked her dear friend cordially for her invaluable frankness, but writhed secretly under the indignity which her daughter's indiscretion had rendered possible, and acknowledged to herself the gravity of the crisis, and the necessity for decisive action. She summoned Florence to her room.

Florence, guessing that she was to be lectured, came with an air of quiet, stubborn resignation, which her mother knew, bespoke the most hopelessly impracticable of all her moods.

‘Florence,’ she said, ‘I have something disagreeable to tell you; you rode with Mr. Erle the other afternoon, did you not?’

‘Yes,’ Florence admitted; ‘he is the only man of them all that has a word to say for himself.’

‘And you stayed with him to-night, singing, after everyone else had left the pianoforte?’

‘True,’ said her daughter, impenitent as ever; ‘the others went away to play at cards; he and I are the only people in the house who dislike whist, and love music.’

‘And yesterday you met him by accident in the garden?’

‘Not by accident,’ said Florence, with provoking candour. ‘We agreed to go, because the Miss Dangerfields were fatiguing us.’

Thus far the battle raged, and neither party had chosen to use their most effective weapon. Florence was strong in the consciousness that Erle was as good as engaged to her, but she was too proud to reveal it; her mother had Lady Dangerfield’s disclosure in reserve, and, like a skilful strategist with a piece of artillery, brought it forthwith into action at the point where the day was going most against her.

‘You know, of course,’ she said, coolly, ‘the price you pay, and make me pay, for such escapades?’

‘No,’ said Florence, with aroused inquisitiveness; ‘what is it?’

‘People have ears, you know, and eyes.’

‘Yes,’ continued the other belligerent, ‘and tongues—all three dangerous things.’

‘Dangerous indeed!’ said Mrs. Vivien, advancing composedly to the point at which she knew that victory awaited her. ‘You know how good-naturedly people will use all three. Already, I have good reason to know, your follies are the plaything of half the gossips in the county; everybody has a story to tell of you.’

‘*Après?*’ asked Florence, doggedly, for her mother was rapidly putting her into a passion. ‘Suppose that Miss Dangerfield has said something sarcastic about me, or Lord Scamperly has pronounced me a flirt; what then?’

‘It is something worse than that,’ said her mother, drawing the cruel blade, and pressing it remorselessly to what she knew was the tenderest spot in her antagonist’s nature—her fear of ridicule—‘how do you like the idea of all the fops in the house, Mr. Erle among the rest,

making a joke of your good nature? don't you know how men talk? Well, here is a specimen, which will make you know the world. Mr. Erle has made a bet with Captain Bibbo, that he will propose to you in a fortnight, and that you shall accept him. Lord Scamperly told Lady Dangerfield, and offered to give her three to one against you. They are all of course very much amused and interested; everybody watches the performance, and everybody expects that Mr. Erle will win. And now, dear, good night, and pleasant dreams!'

CHAPTER III.

DEFEAT.

——saying that she choked,
And sharply turned about to hide her face,
Moved to her chamber, and there flung herself
Down on the great king's couch, and writhed upon it,
And clench'd her fingers, till they bit the palm,
And shriek'd out 'traitor' to the unhearing wall;
Then flash'd into wild tears, and rose again,
And mov'd about the palace, proud and pale.

FLORENCE felt the colour desert her cheek, and with difficulty suppressed the groan of horror and suspense which her mother's revelation called, almost before she was aware, to her lips. Her pride just enabled her, however, to maintain a decent passivity of manner, and to effect a retreat without allowing her mother to see the full amount of the discomfiture which she had inflicted.

'Good night, mamma,' she said, coldly, 'if that is all you have to tell me,' and so escaped, her brain on fire and her heart icy cold, to the solitude

of her room, there to give free vent to her passionate disappointment, to probe the cruel wound, and to meditate a dire revenge. For once she had been betrayed into a tender mood, had forgotten the maxims of a heartless philosophy, and had begun to believe that love need not be, after all, either the pretext of hypocrites, the folly of school-girls, or a polite synonym for the meanest sort of bargain and sale. There had seemed a sort of tenderness in Erle's behaviour, an evident sincerity, nay, sometimes a passionate transport, which it was more than perfidy to have assumed. Men, Florence firmly believed, were for the most part *roués*, nor would ordinary cold-blooded selfishness have shocked or surprised her. But here was an elaborate wickedness, an impudent hardihood, an unmanly cruelty, that more than justified the verdict of her most sceptical mood. Erle stood well in the world, was laughed at by his compeers for his exceptional innocence, was, without a doubt, the best man of the Clyffe party; and was not he worse than a villain? Were these the creatures, she asked herself, to whom people talked gravely about virtue, honour, propriety—whose taste and opinions were so worth respecting, whose very prejudices it was wrong to shock?—

was this the prudish world, whose solemn decencies and obvious shams were to be regarded as despotic laws? Fortunately, though she had been so near defeat, the day was not yet lost, and a fitting vengeance might yet be exacted from the wretch who had designed her humiliation. Through the long night she tossed in passing fits of feverish excitement, wild vexation, vehement design: step by step, her fittest course to victory was tracked and settled: point by point the manœuvres of the next day's battle were resolved, and towards morning Florence, exhausted by the struggles through which she had passed, and calm, because armed with a settled purpose, fell into profound sleep, and appeared at breakfast, radiant, smiling, full of mirth, beautifully dressed, eager for amusement, and more than ever gracious towards the man who already looked upon her as his, and appreciated her splendour with all the keenness of prospective possession.

Erle, who supposed the victory already won, and had been for the last twelve hours enjoying himself extremely in the contemplation of his good fortune from various points of view, felt his last misgiving dispelled by Florence's evident acquiescence, invited her from the breakfast-room

to the terrace, and from the terrace to the garden ; and proceeded, with the assurance of one whose success is no longer matter for anxiety, to translate into definite language the confession and request which had been only vaguely hinted at the night before. Florence opened the way for him to begin, sat listening with a faint smile playing on her lips while he spoke, helped him considerably whenever he showed symptoms of distress, smoothed the course of his oration over an occasional impediment, and at its end gave a polite, good-humoured, but emphatic ‘No.’

Erle was fairly staggered by the unexpected rebuff.

‘Are you really serious?’ he said.

‘I assure you,’ said Florence, looking thoroughly amused, ‘I was never more completely in earnest in my life. Do not give me the distress of repeating my decision.’

Hot tears of anger and disappointment sprang to Erle’s eyes ; his voice, in spite of every effort, was thick and tremulous ; the vanity which the conquest would have so pleasantly flattered, the love which it would have indulged, had both alike received a terrible stab. It had been great fun to see Florence make fools of other men, but Erle

had no relish for the experiment when tried on himself. Florence, too, despite her protestations of seriousness, had evidently a comic view of the matter in her mind, and Erle shrunk in horror from the agony of being ridiculous.

‘And so you were only amusing yourself,’ he said bitterly, ‘and leading me a wild-goose chase to get rid of a tedious fortnight: is everything, then, a joke to you? How right men are to say that you are heartless!’

‘Do they say so?’ asked Florence, with the most provoking indifference. ‘Terrible accusation!’

‘I say so,’ cried Erle, in a passion: ‘I know it to my cost—I shall feel it all my life. Was I vain, was I wrong to hope? Look back, Miss Vivien, to all that has gone on between us for these weeks past; what meant every look, act, speech of yours and mine, but the one thing which you now tell me is impossible? what meant those pleasant rides, those long conversations, in which I, at least, was not playing the hypocrite? that evident preference you showed me? the confidences which you encouraged? ay, and what meant the kiss that only yesterday sealed, as I hoped, the pledge of something better than a passing whim?’

‘It meant,’ cried Florence, reddening at the thought of her indiscretion, and turning deadly white again with excitement; ‘it meant that I was so rash as to do a very foolish thing, and that you are mean enough to remind me of it now. I wish you joy of a valuable secret; boast of it to your companions.’

‘Do not insult me, at any rate,’ said Erle, with dignity; ‘I am not so mean as that. You know that the secret is safe; I prize it too dearly as a recollection to part with it lightly.’

‘I, too, have a secret,’ said Florence, eagerly; ‘or what was one till yesterday. Do you wish for the key to my refusal?—here it is: you began to make love to me for your amusement, and I resolved you should continue it for mine. I know of your wager, and I intend you to lose it. Oh, Mr. Erle, heartless am I?—and is everything a joke to me? and is it you who ask it—you who think us all the proper playthings for men like Lord Scamperly, or Captain Bibo—you who bet about us, as if we were horses or yachts—you who make a joke of everything sacred in life—sacred, do I say? how can such a man know what “sacred” means?’

‘Forgive me,’ cried Erle, ‘I could explain it all.’

‘Pray, spare yourself the trouble,’ said Florence; ‘the story has explained itself, and has left no room for apology. Forgive you? never, never! But I do not hate you, as I should have done if I had discovered the trick too late. What, you fancy you love me?’

‘Fancy!’ exclaimed Erle. ‘Oh! how little you know of the feeling.’

‘Excuse me,’ said his companion, ‘but I believe I *do* know a good deal of it, more, at any rate, than yourself. It is ardent at this moment—I can imagine, all the more ardent for being baffled; but I know that you could afford to bet about it a fortnight ago, and that you would be weary of it in a year. I am flattered by your proposal, but you must excuse me for declining to stake my happiness on anything so uncertain.’

‘I am perfectly certain,’ said Erle, resolutely, ‘that no one will ever love you more sincerely than myself.’

‘Possibly,’ replied Florence; ‘and in that case, I shall take good care not to give anyone the chance of making me completely miserable. But you are wrong indeed, Mr. Erle; I have gauged your character, and looked into my own heart. Believe me, we are neither of us lovers, or likely

to become so. In the first place, you are far too much in love with yourself to have any to throw away on other people; and in the next place—'

'Yes,' inquired Erle, 'in the next place?'

'In the next place,' Florence said, 'we are far too much alike to become affectionate. Our characters are the same, and that is why I disapprove of you. I like myself far too little to wish to be repeated in my husband.'

'Well,' said Erle, insensibly catching something of his companion's bantering mood, 'if you are resolved not to have me, the reason is a handsome one at any rate; but the pill is a bitter one, even when gilt with such a compliment as that.'

'Indeed,' exclaimed Florence, vehemently, 'you do not know how little of a compliment I intended; I could scarcely have paid you a worse one. But you must not be affronted.'

'I am past being affronted at anything,' said Erle, with mock resignation. 'Our quarrels always begin with you.'

'Well, then, we will be friends,' said Florence, 'or rather we *must* be friends, for fortune seems to throw us together, and our tastes are identical. Do you agree?' She gave him her hand—fair, glittering, finely chiselled, a very type of profuse

beauty—and Erle made one more desperate attempt for the prize which was slipping from his clutch.

‘Friendly for the present,’ he said. ‘Some day, perhaps, you will change your mind.’

‘Never!’ said his companion, fixedly; and Erle saw that it was in vain to hope.

They had reached a garden gate; Florence passed through it to go to the house. Erle continued his walk alone, irritated, humbled, sad, but, on the whole, less broken-hearted than he felt he ought to be under the circumstances. He fanned his disappointment, but was surprised to find how feeble was the blaze produced. He invoked despair, but life looked provokingly cheerful. Miss Vivien, so an inward voice told him, had not been altogether in the wrong; the experiment would have been a bold one, and might well have failed. He looked at the precipice from which she had turned him, and shuddered at his recent temerity. She was lovely indeed—never more so than this morning—witty, high-spirited, a capital companion, no doubt; but—Erle acknowledged that there was a ‘but,’ and consoled himself with the reflection that her very excellences might have unfitted her for a wife. It was provoking to

have given her the chance of adding him to the vulgar list of rejected aspirants. The only thing was to brave it out; nobody in the house should, he resolved, see in his demeanour a touch of mortification.

‘If of herself she will not love,’ he hummed to himself—

‘Nothing will make her,
The Devil take her.’

With which impolite and unloverlike ejaculation he tossed away the flower which his companion had dropped in her excitement, lit a cigar, found out Captain Bibbo, laughingly confessed his reverse, paid him his ten pounds, and agreed with him in pronouncing Florence a worthy representative of a sex whose caprices were unintelligible, whose vanity was unbounded, and whose conquest, by fair means or foul, was the lawful prerogative of the other half of creation.

CHAPTER IV.

PLUCKED !

They lost their weeks, they vexed the souls of deans,
They rode, they betted, made a hundred friends,
And caught the blossom of the flying terms.

WHILE Florence was learning the world and adding to her list of conquests, Margaret was passing quietly through a far less eventful existence. The Manor had come to have more than ever about it the air of a household whose young times are over. Enjoyment still was there; but it was enjoyment from which melancholy was not remote, and whose temperature hardly ever rose as high as mirth. Once again the Underwood Church had been hung with black, and once more Mr. Evelyn had entered it as chief mourner, to see another inmate added to the many of his family who already lay there. Opening from the windows of a morning room, and built upon the sunniest side of the house, stretched a long conservatory—the latest of the Squire's

architectural projects—contrived especially for old Mrs. Evelyn's winter walk. But she no longer needs it. Her garden-chair stands unused and dusty in the corner, and her husband, who for years past had loved to walk beside it, now trudges up and down alone, his step a little faltering, and his hair snowy white—a weather-beaten, resolute, cheerful old gentleman, not without his burthen of sad recollections, but bearing his sorrows bravely, and—if somewhat less boisterous—decidedly something tenderer and more considerate than of old. Since her grandmother's death, Margaret had become his constant companion, managed his house, pleased him by a hundred gentle acts, tempted him by a watchful readiness into greater dependence upon her advice, and made herself daily more essential to his comfort. His years began to tell. Already he had had an attack of gout; had turned his two oldest hunters out to grass and sold the rest; preferred a quiet stroll with Margaret to country meetings, quarter sessions, or agricultural dinners; gave up with a dignified alacrity each pleasure or occupation for which his lessening strength unfitted him, and was quoted in the country, with perfect justice, as exhibiting the ideal of a green old age. Nelly, far too much

spoilt to be capable of serious effort, and too completely mistress of her grandfather's heart to admit of the scolding which he sometimes knew that she deserved, had been at last sent off to school, and was being there tamed into something like diligence and order. Charles had for years past spent most of his holidays at Underwood. His mother, never cured of continental tastes, had gone once more to live abroad, had formed the acquaintance of a certain M. de Vernet, and had one day introduced him to her son as his stepfather. But the young Englishman could never bring himself to regard his new relation with becoming respect; and there seemed no possible reason for urging him into unwelcome contact with one whose religion, tastes, and politics were—as his mother confessed to herself—by no means advisable models for the future heir of Underwood. His grandfather's house was always open to him; and a schoolboy naturally found the horses, dogs, and guns, the country life, the zealous servants—to say nothing of his cousin's society—a great deal more to his taste than the dull routine of foreign life—promenades, concerts, casinos, visitors whom he knew nothing about, plays that he could scarcely understand, and *diners à la carte*, whose

attractions he was incapable of appreciating. He had lived with his cousin as with a sister ; and the reflection that any other relationship was possible had never as yet presented itself, either to his mind or to hers. No sister ever performed her duties with a more zealous tenderness. When he came back from Eton in a scrape, Margaret appeased the Squire's wrath, put the offender's repentance into the most available shape, and succeeded in bringing about confession on the one side, and forgiveness on the other. When he wrote harrowing descriptions of his small allowance, of M. de Vernet's parsimonious ideas, of his mother's waning interest in his fortunes, Margaret used, in generous indignation, to convince her grandfather of the necessity of keeping boys well supplied, and sometimes sent off a surreptitious sovereign of her own, by way of meeting some exceptional emergency. The two cousins grew extremely confidential ; and Charles, who was a sentimental lad, laid open his heart to a congenial companion, and intrusted all his most cherished secrets to her keeping. Year by year their intimacy became more complete, and their companionship, if sometimes more constrained, decidedly more pleasurable than before. Nelly's difference of age

seemed greater than it was, and effectually excluded her from the friendship of the other two. They looked upon her as a child, petted and humoured her, anticipated and indulged her caprices, but discussed her character between themselves, and never admitted her to an equality; nor did she ever interest herself in their communications, or seem to wish to overstep the barrier which the circumstances of the case had raised up between them.

The Squire, who was a great believer in early marriages, and who thought both his grandchildren, far too good for anybody but one another, regarded their deepening friendship with undisguised satisfaction, and looked upon them as already impliedly betrothed. Neither of the parties concerned, however, entertained any such view of the matter. They sincerely liked one another; but in Margaret's mind at least the liking had assumed no definite shape, and in Charles's none but the most hazy outline. Margaret was little accustomed to speculate about herself, and scarcely knew her own feelings with any precision. Charles loved his cousin, but feeling himself still a boy, and being of the sort of temperament that is ingenious in suggesting

objections to immediate action, gladly allowed his youth to interpose a long chapter of life between his present love and his future wife. College was not yet over; and college done, he was, it had been settled, to go into the army. At any rate, he was to see the world; and his sentiment was not profound enough to blind him to the advantages of an unfettered existence. He had seldom been in London, and had a vague idea of the pleasures which society might have in store for him. He pictured to himself, in a dreamy way, all sorts of possible enjoyment—the adventures of travel, the excitement of a campaign, the *salons* of foreign cities, the friendship of beautiful women, the companionship of amusing friends—and in none of these day-dreams had Margaret a place. It was natural to wish for a little adventure, to adorn the Great Unknown with some attractive colouring. He would have been grieved to the heart to see anyone else love Margaret as a wife, but he had for the present no desire to have her for his own.

The appearance of the two betrayed the growth of their different characters, and the sort of career to which either was probably destined. Charles's languid air and undecided mouth bespoke the

intermittent impulsiveness of a sentimentalist, who had made but little effort towards self-discipline; a more careful scrutiny might have revealed the selfishness which an habitual yielding to moods engenders, and the blindness to other persons' feelings which is the common defect of unimagi-native natures. But his eyes were full of tenderness and goodhumour, his smile was frank and cordial, his brow was chiselled with a delicate softness, and a light down, which had never known the razor, crept in faint outline about his mouth and neck, and added at once to the comeliness of his appearance and to the indistinctness of the impression which it left upon the beholder.

Margaret, on the contrary, stamped her likeness in clear outline upon the recollection of all who saw her. Nature here had suffered no waste of material. She was slight in form, but its perfect symmetry gave beauty, vigour, and dignity to her movements. Her clear brown eyes lit up with a sudden fire, or dilated with wonder, or melted with infinite tenderness, and in every case alike were full of meaning. Light hair, delicate rather than abundant, encircled her forehead with a sort of halo, such—so ran Charles's dream in his imaginative moments—as hangs above the heads

of saints and martyrs. Her taper neck was set on in an attitude of resolution that gave a character to her whole appearance, and announced her, in language too clear to be mistaken, as of heroic mould, born to do or to suffer, the chosen vessel of a heavenly gift, or the instrument of some lofty purpose. Charles might well grow sentimental, as the holidays closed, and the time for parting came close at hand. Every change distressed him, and this one most of all; for days before the cloud hung over him, and the thought that was pressing on his mind would betray itself by an unusual zeal, a readier chivalry, and a rather more outspoken tenderness than could well find a place in the intercourse of every day. 'Come,' he would say, 'for one more walk with me through the evergreens, you best, and kindest, and prettiest of cousins. How many of the poor fellows whom I shall meet to-morrow will be leaving as pleasant a home, as dear a companion?'

Margaret would indulge in a little private cry at his departure; and would try in vain to make herself believe that the Manor was as agreeable an abode, or the Squire as good a companion, or the garden as pretty, or the sun as bright, or life in general as well worth the having, as when

shared with the friend whose image was already stamped deep upon her heart.

Two winters after the events recorded in the last chapter, Charles found himself unexpectedly at home, and at home under circumstances as little pleasant as expected.

This was how it happened. Charles's college, St. Faith's, had been for some time falling into worse and worse disorder. A crisis was felt to be impending; good judges of academical atmosphere had long predicted a storm. For weeks past the Dean's face had been growing longer and darker; morning chapel had been attended by lessening numbers; discipline had been everywhere infringed; men had 'knocked in' at the most unconscionable hours; no serious outrage had been committed, but a host of petty misdemeanours were gradually filling the cup of official wrath to the point at which an overflow was inevitable. The Dons held a council, acknowledged the emergency, and resolved upon a *coup d'état* at the first favourable opportunity. Still the evil grew. One night a chorus of hilarious youths surrounded the President's windows, and greeted that functionary, who divided his nights between archæological research and the perusal of the College Statutes, with a performance

of 'Mynheer van Dunk,' a great deal more noisy than melodious. On another occasion an early fall of snow threw a great deal of compulsory leisure upon the hunting men's hands, and afforded a grateful opportunity of blockading all the passages in St. Faith's, and confining the Dons to their own quarters for half a day. The interests of 'sound learning' went, of course, to the wall; the little groups who assembled for college lectures bore no proportion to the red-coated crowds who flocked out on hunting mornings, or the boisterous assemblies, where the accidents of the day were discussed far into the night, over flowing rivers of milk-punch or mulled claret. Charles had two good hunters, and worked them with the unscrupulous vehemence of twenty. Everybody admitted that the pace was too good to last; and so it was. Some weeks before the Christmas vacation the crash came.

To begin with, there was a public examination, and awful rumours prevailed as to the manner in which the St. Faith's men had acquitted themselves in that formidable ordeal. Day after day, as each new paper was disposed of, the victims compared notes of their experience, were thunderstruck to find how much they did not know, and

tried in vain to support one another's flagging courage. At last, impudence itself refused to take a hopeful view of the position, and intrepidity lapsed quickly into despair. Some of the least resolute 'scratched,' preferring a decent retreat to the disaster, which was now all but inevitable. The St. Faith's tutors gathered in silent indignation to the battle-field, where their ill-trained combatants were daily succumbing with disgraceful readiness before the onslaught of three ruthless examiners. The President himself sat by, pale with horror at the bathos of ignorance, into which the plummet was lowered, and lowered again, and still without the discovery of any solid bottom. Pity, wrath, contempt, vengeance, swept by turns across the usually placid lineaments of his face, and portended an awful doom to such of the defaulters as fell within the scope of his outraged authority. At last, when Evelyn was called upon, and extemporized a wild translation of a chorus in the *Agamemnon*, the President could endure it no longer, and with an audible ejaculation of 'Eheu!' swept in silence and anger from the scene of action. Blacker and blacker still the storm was gathering around, and next day the thunder-cloud burst. Neither the discomfiture of

the 'Schools,' nor the prospect of humiliation could keep the hunting men from the field. There had been a favourite meet, a noisy breakfast, a general desertion of lectures; a first-rate run had thrown everybody into the highest spirits; a hospitable farmer had extemporised a luncheon; luncheon had presently grown into something more. Charles had been spinning home as fast as a galloping hack could carry him, and had just landed himself at the college gates, with scratched face, a battered hat, and mud-encrusted boots and coat, when the porter came up and handed him a mandate, which had been sent by the Dean to await his return: 'Mr. Evelyn is desired to present himself forthwith at the Dean's rooms.' 'Hoho!' cried Charles, "'forthwith" is the word, is it? and Mr. Evelyn is desired—by Jove, I'll obey for once! Here—take my whip, and give me one of those gowns.' A pile of those ungraceful vestments were lying in the porter's lodge. Charles thrust one over his pink coat, and went with a cheerful audacity across the quadrangle to the Dean's. In another moment he stood before his superior: the two combatants took a look at each other, and each saw what disposed him more than ever for a fight. The

Tutor hated horses and 'horsey' people, thought a scarlet man only less atrocious than the scarlet woman of theology, and regarded top-boots as the very insignia of rebellion. He saw, moreover, that the truant was dropping mud as he came, and was running his spurs into the Turkey carpet. Charles, on the other hand, thought that the Dean had never looked so dyspeptic, so unmanly, or so uncomfortable before: the air of the room was close and heavy, and implied an unwholesome antipathy to open windows; the Dean's wan cheek and rounded shoulders told of the midnight oil and a too assiduous devotion to the early Fathers; the table was ornamented with green baize—and all wore the air of a place at which intellectual, rather than material pleasures were wont to be enjoyed. An angular saint, an uninteresting Madonna, and a serious portrait of the founder of the college, adorned the walls, and added to the austere solemnity of an apartment already sufficiently uninviting.

Charles was more excited than he was aware; and the idea of the Dean's punctilious observance of College regulations, and of the deep reverence with which he regarded them, fretted him into an impertinent humour. Accordingly, the battle

began: the Dean put down the volume of St. Cyprian upon which he had been spending the afternoon, put up his eye-glass to enable him to duly appreciate the whole horror of the spectacle, carefully scanned the intruder from head to foot, assumed a look of indignant amazement, and at last gasped out, 'Mr. Evelyn!' Charles was not in the least inclined to feel modest, and bore the scrutiny with perfect composure. His silence obliged the other to continue: 'What can you mean, sir,' he said, 'by appearing,—by presuming to appear before me in a costume—of which the least that can be said is that it is indelicate, absolutely indelicate, sir?'

Charles made no effort to conceal his smile. 'Indelicate, sir?' he replied, in affected ignorance of the other's meaning.

'A most improper dress, sir,' said the Dean; 'the most improper in the world for you just now; you know, of course, why you are summoned. Allow me to ask, Where have you been?'

A mischievous sprite was hovering at Charles's ear, and prompted a reply which, though entirely veracious, was not calculated to appease the Tutor's wrath.

'In and out of Waterperry Brook,' he said, look-

ing down at his splashed garments and the deep purple of his skirts. 'I was desired to come to you forthwith, or I should have changed my clothes.'

The Dean's indignation was no longer to be restrained or dissembled. He got up from his chair, laid his hand on the closed volume of St. Cyprian, gathered himself together for an oratorical effort, and proceeded to pour out the vials of his wrath.

'This is an outrage,' he said, 'a deliberate outrage. Mr. Evelyn, a Common-room will be held upon you to-morrow, and I give you no encouragement to be hopeful about its results. You will be dealt with as you deserve, unsparingly. Your career has been a dark one; you have disgraced the college and yourself in the schools. The President very nearly had a fit after hearing your disgraceful performance in the *Agamemnon*. You have resolutely turned your back upon my Critical Exegesis; you have been correspondingly neglectful of my lecture on the Heresies of the first two centuries; and you have not been to morning chapel since—since' (the Dean ran his finger up the damning column of non-attendance, and turned round to confront his victim with the newly-discovered iniquity)-

‘since—I declare, only twice the whole term. It is monstrous, sir, and a common-room can alone meet your case. Meantime you will consider yourself confined within the college walls.’

‘I have not dined,’ said Charles, doggedly; ‘I can get nothing from the Buttery, and provisions are not allowed to be brought into college.’

‘That,’ said the Dean, ‘is a matter upon which I have no desire to enter. Good evening, sir.’

‘Do you mean that I am to go without dining, after hunting all day?’ cried Charles, in a passion.

‘I mean nothing but what I say,’ answered the Dean, with provoking composure. ‘Good evening, sir.’

The last ‘good evening’ had much more of command than of friendship in its tones. Charles stalked out of the room, strode across the quadrangle, threw down the offending robe in the porter’s lodge, and in half an hour was re-enacting the scene for the benefit of a very convivial assembly at ‘The Mitre.’

‘Here,’ shouted some one, ‘bring some more champagne. Gentlemen, a toast! “The Dean of St. Faith’s! and the first two centuries!”’ ‘The Dean of St. Faith’s,’ shouted another reveller;

‘dirt, piety, and asceticism!’ ‘With all the honours,’ cried a third; and thereupon, with great clashing of glasses, spilling of wine, and hammering of the table, began a time-honoured chorus:—

Let wine and friendship grace the board,
Let Bacchus’ bounteous gifts be poured,
And he who doth their charms deny,
Down among the dead men, Let Him Lie!

The ascending vehemence of the song had reached its climax, the crash of voices was roaring its loudest, the feast was at its effervescent point, and the Dean of St. Faith’s name upon twenty noisy lips, when the door opened, a polite young man, whose velvet trappings announced his dignity, stepped quietly from the passage; a background of sturdy ‘lictors’ cut off all hopes of flight or resistance; a solemn pause checked the banqueters in mid career; and the proctor’s request was heard without the least interruption. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘I will trouble you for your names and colleges.’

A few days afterwards Charles set off for his home, and several other young gentlemen set off for theirs, exiled by the gentle severity of Alma Mater from the scene of their temptations and

their fall ; and enjoined by many lugubrious advisers to make the most of their compulsory retirement, in the repentance for past shortcomings and the formation of good resolves.

CHAPTER V.

THE FATTED CALF.

En amour les résolutions héroïques sont toujours celles qu'on adopte, parcequ'elles sont impossibles à tenir. On les prend, et l'on satisfait à sa conscience ; on les abandonne, et l'on contente sa faiblesse ; on se persuade que l'on a cédé à la force des choses.

MR. EVELYN was excessively annoyed, and resolved to show it. An indignity seemed to have been offered to the whole family when its representative had been subjected to so public a disgrace. The Squire's views on the subject were indistinct, and the indistinctness added to his distress. He endured his humiliation with stoical dignity, but still with secret pangs. He felt sure that the butler, standing solemnly behind him, knew all about it, and had discussed his young master's predicament in the house-keeper's room : he felt abashed before the parson of the parish, whose son had gone up as a Bible Clerk, and had just come out with flying honours : the little

children, who gave him smiling courtesies in the road; the ploughboys, who scraped a bashful obeisance; the groom, who came to know about putting Charles's third hunter into training; the keeper, who would allow no pheasant to be touched in Charles's favourite fir-wood before the Christmas holidays—all alarmed the Squire's suspicions, lest the awful intelligence should have come to their ears, and their alacrity be only the result of respectful commiseration. He suffered, and he began to feel resentful towards the cause of his sufferings. When Charles arrived, his grandfather received him with a ceremonious urbanity, which was something very different from the hearty, unstudied welcome of old times. Charles had come home thoroughly vexed with his proceedings, and prepared to lapse at once into amicable penitence; but the Squire's frigid politeness threw him upon his defence, and galled him into secret rebellion. Mr. Evelyn had resolved to show his displeasure, but had never realised how difficult a business it would prove. The very difficulty, however, made him more annoyed with Charles, and more than ever resolved against succumbing. He entrenched himself in an ostentatious but chilling hospitality, made no allusion to Oxford, and ignored com-

pletely the circumstances of the prodigal's return. Charles, on his part, secretly fired up at an unlooked-for severity, steeled his heart against the implied reproach, grew more and more stubbornly deferential, and made his grandfather's existence a burthen to him. The longer such a state of things is maintained, the less tolerable does it become. Two days passed wearily away, and Charles began to think that rustication was, after all, a severer penalty than it was the fashion to consider it. As the excitement of his arrival wore off, and the topics of indifferent conversation came to an end, the freezing embarrassment increased. Mr. Evelyn was in despair, and secretly resolved that Charles ought to go forthwith and visit his mother at Wies-Baden. That evening, fortunately, Mr. Blake, the Underwood clergyman, came to dinner, and prevented the discomfort of a *tête-à-tête*. Even here, however, the unfortunate Oxford escapade followed its weary victims relentlessly, and uneasy consciences kept a sad watch behind affected mirth. Mr. Blake was something of a pedant, and lost no opportunity of airing a little stock of learning, for which, it must be confessed, he found but rare opportunities at the Manor House. The arrival of the

eldest son of the family from Oxford seemed an occasion deserving of a more than ordinary display ; and, as if under the impression that Oxonians were in the habit of addressing one another in the dead languages, the worthy divine thought fit to season his remarks to Charles with an appropriate admixture of classical quotation. It pleased his vanity to show his patron and his patron's heir that a country parson might stand on a vantage-ground to both in academical accomplishments. Years before he had tutorised Charles's father at St. Faith's, and he was now genuinely inquisitive to hear about his old college. In vain the Squire, increasingly nervous at every fresh inquiry, endeavoured to give the conversation another bent : in vain he asked after the sick people, the newly-arrived babies, the chancel improvements—all generally the most seductive themes to his clerical tormentor, Mr. Blake, serenely unconscious of the annoyance he was causing, stuck constantly to his subject, and gradually worked his way towards the dreaded discovery. 'Ah,' he said to Charles, 'it is we remote clergy who learn to value our Oxford days : one lays in a store to last one through a tedious lifetime. What pleasant days they were ! what excellent companionship !

what noctes cœnæque deûm! Look what literature does for a man! but store his mind with that, and he can defy solitude, hard work, uncongenial tasks—it is his friend, his faithful companion—pernoctat nobiscum, peregrinatur, rusticatur—’

A bomb-shell alighting on the dining-table could scarcely have produced a more electrical effect than did this awful word. The Squire gave a groan in spite of himself, and so nearly upset the claret-jug in his confusion, that the parson’s oration come to a premature close. Margaret came mercifully to the rescue, and banished St. Faith’s from the conversation for the rest of dinner time. Afterwards they played at whist; but the Squire was testy and negligent, trumped his partner’s good cards, made a palpable revoke, and evidently had his head full of something else, and that something of a disquieting and provoking nature. Charles was to hunt the next day; and Mr. Evelyn looked forward with a sense of relief to the prospect of his departure, and to the opportunity which it would afford him of indulging in low spirits without fear of interruption. Both of the belligerents were suffering in the encounter, and both confided their troubles

to Margaret. She, meantime, had seen that matters were not righting themselves, and watched the right moment for successful intervention. She took Charles off into her room, cured him, by her cheerful gentleness, of his sulky mood, made him wheel round the sofa and make up the fire, and in ten minutes had heard all the history of the disaster.

‘After all, then,’ she said, with an air of the greatest relief, ‘there is not anything so very disgraceful, or so very wrong?’

How pleasantly an argument goes on when both parties are longing for the same conclusion. Charles burst out laughing. ‘Disgraceful!’ he cried; ‘why, Margaret, it is a statistical fact that two-thirds of all the men who go in for examinations get plucked before they have done.’

‘And get rusticated?’ inquired Margaret, innocently.

The rustication was a mistake; Charles was obliged to acknowledge—‘a stupid mistake;’ and then he told her of his interview with the Dean, and of the hunting dinner at the ‘Mitre,’ and of the untimely arrival of the authorities. He was just in the middle of the Dean’s toast when there came a knock at the door, and in walked the

Squire, very much disconcerted to find his place on Margaret's sofa forestalled, and the sympathy he was so much in need of bestowed on another. Charles, of course, stopped short in his narrative, and Margaret, with great presence of mind, took advantage of the opportunity.

‘Grandpapa,’ she said, as she gave him his favourite chair, ‘here is Charlie wanting to make his confession to you; and I don't think it is a very dreadful one. Tell him about it, Charlie; it was all those stupid proctors' fault for coming in at the wrong moment.’

‘It was the divinity that floored me, sir,’ said Charles, making his way with creditable sagacity to the most defensible portion of his case. ‘I had done pretty well all through, and my tutor told me I should have got a second; but they got me upon the Gnostics.’

‘The who?’ asked the Squire, who was not at all learned in Church history, and knew little about heretics, except what he heard occasionally on Sunday mornings.

‘Gnostics, sir,’ said Charles; who, since his defeat, had been getting up the tenets of that sect, and was only too happy to turn his knowledge

to account: 'they lived in the second century, and they believed in Eons.'

'Yes, of course,' said the Squire, who began to feel out of his depth. 'You ought to have known it. I have not the least doubt that Margaret could have told you all about them.'

'Indeed,' said Margaret, 'I could do no such thing, and I don't wonder a bit at Charlie's not knowing. But tell grandpapa about the Dean—the way he wished you "good evening."'

Charles plucked up heart, gave his story as well as he could, put the college authorities in as absurd a light as possible, and in the end made his peace with his grandfather. All three felt their hearts lightened by the reconciliation, and both the men secretly blessed Margaret for the part she played as peacemaker between them. The Squire found it easy to forgive. He still remembered the time when a day's hunting appeared the first of all earthly considerations, and could not but take the part of his own flesh and blood against what was, after all, a piece of pedantic despotism. The tutor had been wrong, no doubt, and from this it was easy to pass to the welcome conviction that Charles had been right. Meanwhile the stream of pleasant familiar talk,

which for days past had seemed almost dry, began to flow again; and Charles, delighted to throw off the icy reserve in which he had been locked, became more than ever cheerful, gracious, and affectionate.

‘Well,’ said the Squire, as he rose at last to go away, ‘we must not starve you, at any rate, when you come home from hunting to-morrow. By the way, Charlie, you are going to ride the little chestnut, but you must be content not to press her, please; for, you remember, they did not expect you in the stables for a month to come.’

‘I will take care, sir,’ said Charles, with a blush; ‘I dare say we shall be only cantering from one wood to another.’

‘That will be just the thing for her,’ said the Squire. ‘And now, Margaret, you had better break up your court, and send us both away to bed.’

Charles lingered behind and bade his cousin a tender good-night. ‘You are my good genius,’ he said, taking her hand kindly. ‘How pleasant to be in trouble, and to be rescued by you! What strange spell is it that you charm us with? Come now, you are a magician, are you not?’

‘To be sure,’ said Margaret; ‘this is my cell, and here I ply my trade of sorceress. Escape, rash mortal, while you may; before I blow out the candles and leave you alone in the dark with my hobgoblins. Listen, there is twelve o’clock. Good-night, Charlie.’

Margaret was already in the passage, and leading the way. An impulse, sudden and irresistible as lightning, flashed into her companion’s mind. ‘She is beautiful,’ said a stirring voice within; ‘she is nobly good; her elevation lifts you above yourself; her purity refines you; her wisdom strengthens your flagging will; dare to try to win her—try and succeed—try now.’ Was some demon of cowardice lurking by Charles’s side, paralysing his will and unnerving his hand as he essayed to act. All his life, so something told him, was centred in a moment’s crisis. How should he acquit himself? His heart throbbed violently, and the word seemed half trembling upon his lips. ‘Spread your sail,’ said the inward counsellor, ‘while the wind favours; the prize is great; only be a man and dare to grasp it.’

It is perilous, they say, to resist inspiration. Charles listened, hesitated, longed to obey, once again faltered, and once again the warning voice

spoke, this time in terms of vehement, contemptuous upbraiding. 'Faint heart,' it said, 'waverer, poltroon, act now or never act again! awake from your idle dream of love, or sleep on for a disgraced and miserable lifetime; rise, or be for ever fallen; dare, or reap a coward's meed! The golden fruit hangs close within your reach; pluck it, pluck it while you can!'

He had only a few seconds as he followed her to make up his mind. A dozen yards more and their paths would diverge to different parts of the house. But no; once again fortune favoured him. Margaret recollected a note that she had left unwritten, turned suddenly short, met her cousin face to face, told him with a laugh of her mistake, and went back to her sitting-room. 'Follow,' cried the voice, louder now, more vehement, more reproachful, less mistakeable than ever: 'Coward that you are to doubt: if for failure, what risk better worth the running? If for success, how almost divine a prize! Still doubting? Weak, indolent, spiritless wretch!—act—act! clutch your good fortune while you may. Have you a spark of manhood, a drop of hero's blood in your veins, a touch of greatness? Away with unmanly timidity. Now is the crowning moment. There lies

your promised land, dreamed of, longed for, well-beloved; enter and possess it, or be eternally outcast.'

Charles stood for an instant irresolute, the toy of conflicting waves of passions that tossed him hither and thither. At last his weaker nature triumphed. 'I will ask her to-morrow,' he said, and turned away, his nerves overstrung and his pulse still fluttering wildly, to his bedroom, uncomfortably conscious—though he strove against it—that he had failed; that he had been tried and found wanting, that an encounter had been declined; a fair chance thrown away; that the treasure he feebly longed for was less than ever his. 'To-morrow,' he thought; but when do the to-morrows of dreamers ever come? When does the flagging interest, once indulged with a needless delay, again wax vigorous enough for the prompt deed, the perilous venture, the life and death struggle? When does the prosperous wave of fortune's tide, once allowed to pass, again run in our favour? Charles's conscience smote him ruthlessly, and banished each plausible excuse. At last he slept, and visionary shapes moved sadly about him, pointing a finger of scorn, urging him, with despairing vehemence, to act, or hissing out—

‘Fool! idler! coward!’ as they turned away and left him to his fate.

Meanwhile, the Squire and Margaret had gone to bed with lighter hearts than for days past; and the next morning the good effects of peace were discernible in the unusual cheerfulness that reigned at breakfast. Mr. Evelyn was in the highest spirits, insisted upon driving his grandson to the meet, and discussed the county gossip, the horses which they passed on the road, and the probabilities of the day’s sport, with infectious animation. Charles banished all thoughts of self-reproach, and threw himself eagerly into the spirit of the occasion.

‘Here are the Clyffe people,’ said the Squire, as they turned a corner on the road, and Florence appeared at the head of a little cavalcade, dividing her attention between a fidgety horse and a train of talkative admirers. ‘That is Florence Vivien in front! she is the best rider and the fastest talker, and—to some people’s taste—the handsomest young lady in the county; and they say she makes a goose of every man who comes near her: so be warned in time.’

‘Never fear,’ said Charles, with a laugh, secretly vowing that that should be his last day of bachelor-

hood; 'she seems too well supplied to need additional worshippers.'

'Margaret does not like her in the least,' said the Squire; 'we have merely exchanged visits since they came back from Italy, where, among other fine arts, she acquired that of flirtation.'

Presently Charles got his horse, and joining the Clyffe party, found himself in the midst of friends. Anstruther, an old Etonian, now in the Guards, and the freshest of Florence's conquests, was ever by her side; and near them followed Erle, whose acquaintance Charles had made at All Souls, where both had been frequent guests. 'Evelyn!' they both cried out, as they recognised him. Charles was forthwith introduced to Florence, and soon found himself, like everyone else, entirely at his ease. Florence's court had at any rate the recommendation that it was always lively. 'Charlie Evelyn,' said Erle; 'and on a pretty, plump little thoroughbred, who is quite certain to give him a roll before the day is over. Count Malagrida,' he said, turning round to a handsome-looking man who rode behind him, 'you were asking me about Oxford yesterday; here is Mr. Evelyn, who will give you all the latest news: make the most of

your time, for you will not see much of one another, I guess, when the run begins.'

Count Malagrida, distinguished as the possessor of a black silky moustache, a pair of gloomy languid eyes, a large fortune, and an extremely bad reputation, had formed the Viviens' acquaintance two winters before at Rome, had improved it assiduously during the previous season, professed himself a great admirer of Florence, and had now taken Clyffe in the course of a hunting tour. He was quite at home in English society, talked the language admirably, affected English tastes, rode the best horses that were to be had for love or money, and was acknowledged, even by the Heavyshire connoisseurs, to ride them well—well, that is, for an Italian.

He now greeted Charles with a pleasant frankness, asked him about the woods they were about to draw, and declared himself in love with the Heavyshire country. Charles, in the grasp of a composed and penetrating nature, was too much fascinated to observe his cold sardonic lips, the gloom which settled on his features as his artificial smile died away, or the wrath which flashed ominously from his eye, when for an instant his horse turned restive. A judge of physiognomy, however

would have read 'villain' plainly written in every lineament of his face.

Charles was less pleased with Erle's appearance. He had not certainly improved since the old college days. The lines of his face, somewhat too finely cut for a man in the first instance, had become almost feminine in their delicacy, and gave him the aspect of an invalid. His attitudes and movements bespoke the languor of indifference, and his indifference was especially ostentatious, Charles thought, in his behaviour to Miss Vivien. His adventure with Florence two years ago had not, one might fancy, tended to improve his character. She had accused him of levity, and it was easy enough to deserve the accusation; for once he had felt fond of a woman, and she had rejected him in the manner least agreeable to his vanity; she had criticised his character, and pronounced him unfit. He had attempted sentiment, and found his attempt, not indeed scorned, but accepted with a good-natured, condescending scepticism. Henceforward, in matters of sentiment, he became more than ever of a sceptic himself. His rejection was known to all, and he found his best course was not to attempt concealment, but to laugh at it and himself. It was a boyish indis-

cretion, with which he could afford to be thoroughly amused. Constantly meeting Florence, never having become estranged, getting to know her better and approve her less, a strange sort of intimacy had grown up between them. They openly professed, and to a certain degree felt, a mutual dislike, but found each other very good company. Everybody knew that they were people who had thought of love, and having abandoned the idea, could speak of it without reserve. Either alluded to the breach with perfect unconcern; and both said things about it and themselves which shocked quiet people, and convinced the world that the one was palpably hard-hearted and the other the reverse of modest.

Presently the others moved away, and Erle and Evelyn found themselves riding on either side of Florence.

‘The last time we met,’ Florence said, ‘I think you proposed to me, and gave me a rose, and swore eternal fidelity.’

Charles blushed, looked extremely bashful, and said, as gallantry bid him, that he remembered perfectly.

Erle turned up his eyes, and gave a little mock sigh, inaudible to all but Florence. ‘Ils n’en

mourraient pas tous, mais tous étaient frappés,' he said. 'What a list of conquests since then! And how many years ago, Miss Vivien, was that?'

'A hundred and fifty,' answered Florence; 'when Mr. Evelyn and I were young and innocent, and such wicked people as you were never dreamt of.'

Presently there came a great tootooing from a distant horn, wild screams from the corner of the wood, ploughboys gesticulating in the horizon, a sudden movement among the crowd of horses, a mad jumping in and out of the covert on the part of excited whips, a general rush for the only gate out of the field—and Major Vivien threw down his cigar, put his horse into a sharp gallop, and called out to the group of talkers that the fox had gone away. Erle, who was a keen sportsman, and did not like Florence near well enough to care about opening gates for her, made instantly for a formidable stile, and got off with the huntsman and those fortunate two or three who always happen to be on the right side of the wood. Charles looked ruefully at his horse's streaming coat, and already panting sides. Anstruther rode by Florence's side, admiring her horsemanship, leading at the doubtful jumps, and wishing devoutly that

he could get a fall in her service. A burst of ten minutes shook off the loose array of spectators and idlers, who had gathered round the meet, and already foreshadowed the several fortunes of the day. Florence, who always rode as if for her life, was galloping rather wildly over the crest of a smooth upland meadow, her gentleman in due attendance, and her groom three-quarters of a field behind. Major Vivien had pushed his horse down into a lane which he knew must be crossed, and was trotting leisurely on, while the fox was being hurried through a gorse on the hill-side. Erle and a handful of hard riders were following close alongside of the hounds, and were congratulating themselves upon being in for a good run. Charles, enveloped in a cloud of steam and foam, and oblivious of his grandfather's injunctions, was getting the last half mile out of his labouring chestnut, and was sorrowfully meditating a premature return. His reflections were suddenly cut short by Florence flying past him, her horse's head high in the air, and her own attention apparently devoted to the fast-vanishing pack. A thin, straggling, unsuspicious-looking fence separated them from the adjoining field, and Florence, her blood by this time at boiling-point, went at it as hard as

ever she could. Two strides off, her horse half swerved away; her ready hand pulled him straight, a lash from her whip sent him rushing wildly at the opposing barrier: a strong limp bough caught his legs as he flew across, and in another instant both he and his mistress were rolled over into a nice, soft ploughed field beyond. Charles concentrated the chestnut's remaining energies into a single effort, and was soon at the fallen Amazon's side. Anstruther galloped back in great alarm, and was on his legs in an instant. Florence sprang up unassisted, and as quickly subsided, turning deadly pale.

‘It is nothing, I assure you,’ she said, ruling her face to a smile, which scarcely disguised her pain—‘pray, both of you go on this minute.’

‘My horse's lungs make it impossible for me to obey,’ said Charles. ‘I am already at a dead stand-still; besides, I am afraid you are hurt.’

‘Well,’ said Florence, ‘Mr. Anstruther, at any rate, I insist—’

‘And I obey orders,’ said Anstruther, who, though a lady's man, was beginning to feel nervous about the hunt, ‘and I leave you in safe hands.’

So saying, he jumped on his horse, and was pre-

sently out of sight. Florence, sitting in the mud, looked as queen-like as possible, and invested her predicament with a grace and dignity of its own.

‘How extremely embarrassing!’ she said, with a laugh; ‘but, Mr. Evelyn, pray take my groom’s horse, and go on; yours will do perfectly well for him to follow me home.’

Charles, looking at the fallen goddess, very much preferred the idea of a *tête-à-tête* with her to the faint chance of catching the hounds, and resolutely refused the offer.

‘Indeed,’ he said, ‘you must let me see you safe to Clyffe. Shall we send for a carriage?’ For Florence seemed still immovable.

‘Not for the world,’ she cried; ‘my mother would be frightened out of her wits; and besides, it is nothing. If you would help me up, I think that I could manage now.’

Florence was soon safe on her horse again: it cost her some pain, as Charles could see; but she disavowed it bravely, laughed about her own bad riding, and, as the two rode quietly homewards, the conversation naturally took a confidential turn. Florence could be extremely agreeable, and just now she was quite inclined to please. She was gratified at having caught a new admirer;

Anstruther was so innocently dull, Erle was too familiar to be amusing, Malagrida was unassailable, Charles looked bright and susceptible and entertaining, and Florence carried him off joyfully, as an energetic spider does some little fly, for the purposes of home consumption. She flattered him by her inquisitiveness, heard about school and college, found out a number of common acquaintances, gave him the cleverest accounts of their foreign expeditions, and presently began to talk to him about his cousins.

‘I have seen Miss St. Aubyn only once,’ she said—‘at the County ball—we have always missed each other when we went to call. I suppose she is at the Manor?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Charles; ‘and Nelly is to come to-night. You must remember her, a little child?’

‘Yes,’ said Florence, ‘a very pretty little child, with soft brown hair, and the most capital eyes. And has she turned out a beauty?’

‘I have not seen her for three years,’ said her companion. ‘She had to be sent to school, and I was away in her holidays; Margaret, however, considers her loveliness itself.’

‘I must come and judge for myself as soon as possible,’ said Florence, inwardly making up her

mind to like Nelly a great deal better than her sister.

At the Clyffe Lodge they met Mrs. Vivien, and Florence explained away her accident, introduced Charles to her mother, and all three went in to lunch. There were plenty of non-hunters in the house. Florence's fall aroused the greatest interest, conversation flowed pleasantly along, and presently the Major, who did not care about an afternoon's run, came in. By six o'clock most of the party were reassembled and chatting round the drawing-room fire. Charles found himself pressed to stay; Miss Vivien, in particular, would not hear of his departure.

'Think of your poor horse, no doubt just beginning to recover! Papa, Mr. Evelyn jumped after me, and saved my life. I hope you appreciate the heroism. Mr. Anstruther, on the contrary, galloped away, and left me to my fate.'

'You told me to do so,' cried Anstruther, blushing at so sudden an attack.

'We do not always choose to be obeyed,' said Erle. 'How unfortunate that I was six fields away, and had no opportunity of interpreting your wishes!'

'But in your case,' said Florence, with a laugh,

‘I should have wished to be obeyed; you are the last person in the world to see one in misfortune. Mr. Anstruther, I know, would have sympathised; you would have been hypocritically polite.’

‘Hypocrisy, you know,’ said Erle, ‘is a tribute to virtue, and politeness is at any rate better than nothing. Anstruther deserved to tumble into the brook, as he did, for deserting you in distress.’

‘I was not the least in distress—I was very comfortable in the mud; and Mr. Evelyn and I had a great deal to tell one another about.’

‘I congratulate both sincerely,’ said Erle, with a somewhat disrespectful laugh. ‘Thirteen miles I think you had to ride; I should have been at my wits’ end for something to say before we were half way home.’

‘And so should I,’ cried Florence. ‘How lucky that you always lose sight of me on hunting mornings!’

Dinner was announced; Florence went off at once with Charles, and Anstruther turned in desolation of spirit to find a companion among the less distinguished young ladies. The party was large, talkative, and amusing. Charles was dazzled, excited, above all extremely entertained. The conversation, though evidently unstudied,

seemed to him brisk and witty. Florence made herself the centre of a hot fire of repartee, and received every onslaught with the cheerful daring of experienced success: as Erle and her father were within reach, she was in no danger of unwelcome tranquillity.

‘Well, Erle,’ asked the Major presently from his end of the table, ‘and how did you like your new purchase? he is handsome enough, at any rate.’

‘Do you mean Runnymede?’ asked Erle. ‘He is delightful, I assure you, when one has once become friends with him, and will soon be careful enough to carry a bishop.’

‘He is very unfortunate, then,’ said Anstruther, ‘for he is always in trouble. I should like to know how many mistakes he made to-day? Pray, what is his history?’

‘I bought him of Lord Almersfield,’ said Erle, ‘for five-and-twenty pounds. He gave him six falls in a single morning; and Lady Almersfield never left off crying till he was safe in my possession.’

‘Safe is hardly the word for him wherever he is,’ said Anstruther. ‘However, you get amusement out of him, and a new sensation, I suppose?’

‘Yes,’ said the Major. ‘Erle thinks the chief recommendation in a hunter is to be as little like a hunter as possible—do you not, Erle?’

‘Ah!’ said Florence, ‘like Baron Immanuel, the half-converted Jew, who chose his child’s godfather, *parcequ’il était le moins Chrétien possible.*’

‘What excellent things the Jews say,’ said Erle, who had all the indisposition of an indolent man to become the topic of conversation. ‘Did you hear of Benassa’s retort to a set of greedy shareholders, who were squabbling with the most piggish greediness over the terms of his loan. “*Il va nous avaler tous,*” cried one of the directors. “*Pardon, messieurs,*” said the old Hebrew, “*ma religion me le défend.*”’

‘What a delightful old man!’ cried Florence; ‘and are all Jews as witty as that, Mr. Erle? In “Coningsby,” you know, they are proved to be everything else! but I do not recollect that this was touched on.’

‘Coningsby himself has said a few rather good things in his time.’

‘Pray,’ asked the Major, ‘have you heard my story of a Jew with a bad conscience?’

‘I never heard of a Jew with anything else,’

Erle said. 'Anstruther and I, when in our extravagant young days, found it out to our cost.'

'Well,' said the Major, 'my Jew was a religious Jew, but had a weakness for roast pig, and loved to retire into the country to regale himself occasionally on the forbidden delicacy. Once, in the middle of one of his illicit repasts, there came on a thunder-storm. Every flash of lightning seemed a special judgment on his crime. The thunder went on; the flashes were awful; the little pig succulent; the Jew fumed, trembled, and ate. At last a louder clap than ever made him too frightened to continue. "What a fush!" he exclaimed, as he resigned his knife and fork in indignation, "what a fush about a little pesh of pork!"'

'Poor Jew!' cried Florence; 'it was really hard; but a thunder-storm always frightens one out of one's wits, even though one is doing nothing wrong. That horrid old Lady Whigton, you know, like a mean wretch as she was, used to make her maid dress up in her clothes, in hopes she might get struck instead of herself.'

'Ha!' said the Count, 'I honour her ladyship for that—a good piece of racy, downright selfish-

ness, such as we all feel, if we dared but show it. For my part, if I had the least idea that any particular flash was intending to honour me with a visit, I should step into my man Giacomo's livery without a moment's hesitation. But what a blessing to have an easy conscience !'

The Count swept a smile of happy innocence round the table, and appeared to be mentally taking his stand, wrapped in his own integrity, amidst a crashing universe.

'We all feel it,' said Erle, with a laugh. 'Nothing but a conviction of one's essential excellence carries one through the fatigues of existence. Look at Major Vivien in the House, for instance—who could face Parliament without a spotless soul?'

'It is no joke, I can tell you,' exclaimed the Major, 'legislating for a thankless world two hours after it has gone to bed. If Virtue can befriend us, I am sure we need her help.'

'We are all on the right side here, I believe,' said Malagrida, looking round. 'Well, now, I make a confession—'

'Stop !' cried the Major, pointing to Florence. 'Your neighbour there is a traitress in the camp, and pretty nearly a radical.'

‘A traitress!’ cried Malagrida, in assumed alarm, ‘a radical! a monster!’

‘Yes,’ said Florence, ‘I confess I like a winning cause. I am quite tired of minorities. Just look at your last *fiasco*.’

‘They are badly generalised,’ said Malagrida; ‘it is all Coningsby’s fault, you know.’

‘No, no!’ cried Florence; ‘that is always the complaint of bad soldiers. Coningsby is their greatest card, after all, only they play him so dreadfully.’

‘Or rather,’ suggested Erle, ‘how dreadfully he uses them. A whole day of ruses, a night attack, a hopeless battle, and a long march home through the mud.’

‘With the loss of bag, baggage, and artillery,’ added the Major, who was still smarting with the recollection of a compulsory Methodist Rate-in-aid Bill. ‘All our great principles are gone to the dogs.’

‘You cannot go skirmishing,’ said the Count, ‘except in light attire. Believe me, you look extremely well without your principles, and will no doubt get accustomed to it by degrees.’

‘Oh, yes!’ said Erle; ‘they will get to like it like Coningsby himself: in one’s old age one

likes variety, and he has taken a fancy to forlorn hopes.'

'Yes,' said the Major; 'like the general whom Napoleon cashiered because, as he said, he had a perfect mania for scientific disasters.'

'Never mind, papa,' cried Florence, consolingly: 'in politics, like war,

—— no feat
Is nobler than a brave retreat.'

'Suppose, then,' said Mrs. Vivien, who had been trying to catch her daughter's eye, 'that we proceed to effect one?' And thereupon the gentlemen were left to their claret.

CHAPTER VI.

HELEN.

— The petitionary grace
Of sweet seventeen.

THE chestnut, who had had a good rest, and been hospitably cared for in the Clyffe stables, seemed quite to have recovered from his morning's trial, and started off in the highest spirits. As he cantered gaily homewards Charles set himself to think over his morning's adventure and his new acquaintance. His reflections were not altogether agreeable. The society which he had left was a keener atmosphere than that to which he was going, and he had liked to breathe it. He was roused into a bolder and more ambitious than his ordinary mood, and he felt overstrung for his Underwood home, its quiet enjoyment, its unambitious mirth, its simple and unconscious kindness. He had left behind him a set of people brilliant, ready, well accustomed to the latest phases of life, deeply

versed in its ways, *blasés* with its pleasures, familiar with its crimes. He had heard books, men, politics touched upon with an experienced daring, an off-hand half contempt, and, at the same time, an amusing cleverness that completely dazzled him. 'Was everyone in the great world,' he thought to himself, 'as sharp as they? and if so, how tame a place the Manor must be thought!' He fretted at the idea of the Squire's kindly garrulousness, the little country chit-chat he loved, and the village matters which he thought quite worth hearing about and discussing. How the young chestnut had jumped; how the hounds were looking; whether James, the new whip, was as quick as William, his predecessor; where the fox had broken, and where it had gone, and why it did not go somewhere else; and whether the huntsman thought it was the same fox that had given them such a good run from the same wood a month before—all these questions Charles knew that his grandfather would, in due course of time, propound, and would consider them the natural and appropriate topics of the evening. They were not, he bitterly felt, worth so much attention: there were bigger matters in the world, and keener interests, and of these he seemed just to

have had a taste enough to disincline him for his old pursuits. Margaret, too, it must be confessed, paled by the side of Florence's more striking beauty. Her simplicity of character contrasted with the other's confident shrewdness: her modesty was pretty indeed; but Florence's daring air, and high-spirited gestures, were far more impressive: her effortless flow of gentleness and good-humour, after Florence's impetuous fascinations, seemed like the pools of some half-stagnant stream loitering by the side of a noisy, brisk mountain torrent. 'We don't set up for wits at Underwood,' the Squire had often said with cheerful contentment. Charles in his heart acknowledged and resented the confession, and for the first time in his life felt half ashamed of his home. Florence was glittering before his mind's eye, and made everything else look meagre and colourless. Presently, as he rode along a bridle path, he came upon a flight of hurdles, and when the chestnut half offered to refuse, Charles, delighted to vent his ill-humour, clapped his spurs to his sides, and rode him at it so fiercely that the young horse was soon as hot as ever, and revenged himself for so unprovoked an assault by being as disagreeable as possible all the way home. There was a chorus of

indignation in the Underwood stables, when he was led in, still in a quiver of excitement, to be cooled and cleaned; and the coachman, who looked in to superintend the process, gave a condemnatory groan at the creature's condition, and agreed with his subordinates that the way in which the Oxford gentlemen used their horses was a downright scandal to a Christian stable. The poor chestnut, being of limited intelligence, probably never came to understand that Charles's ill-usage fell only accidentally upon himself, and was the mere casual expression of a general discontent.

Margaret met her cousin in the corridor, and greeted him with a good-humour that he felt was undeserved. The Manor, Charles found, was in confusion with the prospect of a late arrival. No thoughts of bed could of course be entertained till the great event of the evening was disposed of. The Squire meanwhile was busy with a letter in the library, and the two cousins went together to the drawing-room.

'I am so glad you are come,' Margaret said, presently: 'the carriage is gone for Nelly, and she will be here in half an hour. I should have been so sorry for you to have missed her.'

One of the most degrading things about an ill-

temper is its caprice: it flares out at this or that without rhyme or reason, and sometimes the most harmless causes provoke the worst explosions. Charles was far from having expended his anger on his horse, and proceeded to let it off at his cousin. He had been by no means fond of Nelly. When he last saw her she was in that unpleasing interval, between childhood and youth, that seems to lack most of the charms of both. He fancied her flighty, vain, and trivial: he remembered that she was apt to be passionate, and to take offence: he pictured her to himself as awkward and embarrassed, with very untidy clothes, and a constant supply of needless blushes. Margaret's enthusiastic affection seemed extremely provoking. To have the arrival of a schoolgirl made the occasion of a scene, and himself obliged to play a part in it, was just the sort of petty idea against which, just now, his whole nature was in rebellion.

'You know,' said Margaret, 'you must be delighted to see her.'

'Delighted!' said Charles, with a dash of contempt in his tone: 'of course—youth, beauty, innocence, the interest of an expanding mind, an accurate knowledge of geography, the multiplica-

tion table up to 24 times 24, and a long duet every evening—delightful!’

‘Come, come, Charlie,’ cried Margaret, growing quite red at so unusual a piece of rudeness; ‘don’t be cross: what has gone wrong with you to-day?’

‘My horse has for one thing,’ said the other, pretending not to know that he was sulky, ‘or, rather, he would not go at all. However, I ought not to complain, for he secured me a *tête-à-tête* all the way back to Clyffe with Miss Vivien, and they are all coming over here to lunch to-morrow.’

‘With Miss Vivien?’ cried Margaret: ‘then it is she who has sent you home so cross: no wonder!’

‘I know you don’t like her,’ said Charles: ‘it is a mistake, I assure you. But, seriously, I cannot see why I am to be in raptures at a schoolgirl’s return.’

‘A schoolgirl!’ cried Margaret, indignantly; but then came a sound of wheels in the avenue, a ring at the bell, and Margaret ran off to welcome the new comer. Charles followed at leisure, and was just in time to see a very pretty creature jump out of the carriage, and rush, with an exclamation of delight, into Margaret’s arms. Then came a great embarrassment; for Charles and Nelly had always been accustomed to kiss each

other, and Nelly had never reflected on the method which would best, at present, reconcile the claims of propriety and affection. She took her cousin's hand, grew very red, hung back an instant, and finished by presenting him with a crimson cheek, on which Charles, as in duty bound, impressed a reverent token of devotion. Altogether she lost her presence of mind; but she lost it in the most becoming manner, and looked so bewitchingly modest, that Charles would have been a perfect monster not to repent instantaneously of his surliness. Her appearance was a wonderful improvement upon his recollections; her schoolgirl awkwardness had given place to a striking beauty of form and movement; her very embarrassment wore a graceful air; her high colour had softened down to a warm, delicate tint; and her dress, which looked beautifully new and fresh, was in good taste, and showed her off to advantage.

‘Welcome to Underwood!’ he cried; and Margaret looked on, delighted at the good impression she was evidently making. Then the Squire came out; the same kisses, without the same embarrassment, were interchanged, Mr. Evelyn declared her grown, praised his granddaughter's blooming cheeks, and Margaret presently carried her off for

a few more confidential endearments than had as yet been possible.

‘How big he has grown!’ Nelly cried, as soon as they found themselves alone: ‘what a tall man, dearest Meg; and quite a thick moustache!’

‘To be sure,’ said Margaret, ‘we are all getting on in life: don’t you see what an old woman I am becoming?’

‘You look prettier every time I come home,’ said the other, taking her hand affectionately; ‘and what dear soft eyes you have, and how glad I am to be home again!’

While the young ladies were being sentimental upstairs, the Squire was getting the news of the day out of Charles, who soon became talkative in spite of his bad resolution.

‘And so you crossed the Cappenden Brook?’ he said; ‘it is pretty big now: a nasty place—rotten banks, and a bad landing: did anyone get in?’

‘I did not get as far,’ said Charles; ‘Miss Vivien had a fall, and I went back with her; and, grandfather, I thought you would like me to ask them to lunch.’

‘Of course,’ said the Squire; ‘and when are they coming? Did you like the Clyffe party,

Charles? a little fast, are they not? Mrs. Vivien is a great deal too much of a fine lady for me.'

'They are very amusing,' said Charles, 'and know all about everything. That Italian is a curious fellow, grandfather; there's some mystery about him; they say he is a Carbonaro, or a government spy, and afraid to go home, because he has killed some one. He told us all sorts of queer doings about the Romish priests, policemen, and society. What do you think?—the Duke of Baveno was coming home one night——'

'Hush!' said the Squire, who had a morbid horror of anything like a scandal. 'I think I hear your cousins on the stairs.'

Charlie checked himself in time to change the conversation before the door opened; but he reflected that Miss Vivien had heard the story in the afternoon without the least displeasure.

Meanwhile Nelly was established upstairs, enjoying the first pleasant taste of home life, and busy with the cares of a needlessly sedulous toilette. Box after box was opened, ransacked, and deserted in the search for some essential ornament. It was late, indeed, and there were but three people to see, but not too late to hesitate as to the fitting shade of colour, the prettiest

riband, the appropriate dress; nor were three pairs of eyes, two of them belonging to men, too few to raise a little flutter of excitement and apprehension. Besides, Charles's appearance gave a new, strange, powerful interest to the occasion. Men, so Nelly's instructresses and her French school life had taught her, were creatures of a far-off world, to be seen, talked of, perhaps even thought about, but scarcely to be spoken to or handled; they passed in the street, but they were hardly more than phantoms. The sudden proximity was novel, alarming—on the whole agreeable. Nelly had no dream of love, except as a vague, awful, mysterious possibility. She and her companions, indeed, cherished a sort of wild admiration for a picturesque Pole who came twice a-week to give them music lessons, and who was conventionally regarded as the type of human excellence; but the Pole had impressed himself but in the most hazy outline on her heart, and was already fast fading from her recollection. To have a real live, fresh young man calmly walk up to her and embrace her, to have him take her hand in his, to hear him talk, to be about to spend an evening in his society, was something more than she could as yet confront with quiet nerves.

Vanity made her shy, nervousness put her into a bustle. Margaret came at last to fetch her, and was for hurrying the preparations.

‘I must not look quite a fright, must I?’ she said, petitioning for another five minutes; ‘to-morrow, dear Meg, I must show you my new dresses: the last fortnight, you know, I have opened no book but “Le Follet,” and spent half my life at the dressmaker’s, and I have got two bonnets which—which—but you shall see to-morrow.’

‘They are pretty, I hope?’ asked her sister.

‘Pretty!’ exclaimed Nelly, in a fervent tone, which implied that no human expression could do the least justice to her feelings; ‘my dearest Meg, wait!’

And so the two went downstairs and found the Squire and Charles waiting for them. Nelly need have been under no alarm as to the impression created by her arrival. Charles had already been loud in her praises. No ray of light darting upon a sombre scene, ever effected a quicker change than did the new-comer amid her more staid relations. She was no sooner at her ease than she began to be playful and to infect the rest with playfulness. She darted about the room

with a pleased, inquisitive air, discerning this or that little change, and demanding a history from each. She took her grandfather his cup, as in old times, and smoothed his forehead caressingly, as when she was a child on his knee. She was easily persuaded into being talkative about her journey, and described each little adventure with a sort of graphic importance, whose very childishness made it entertaining.

Nelly, on her part, was curious to hear Charles's account of his reception at Clyffe, and of the party there assembled. 'Miss Vivien was talking about you,' Charles said to her; 'shall I tell you what she said?'

'Yes,' said Nelly, her eyes lighting up with impatience; 'tell me: what was it?'

'No,' said Charles, laughing; 'they are all coming over to-morrow to pay their respects to you; they shall speak for themselves.'

Nelly clapped her hands with excitement. 'Who are coming?' she asked eagerly.

'Several London dandies,' answered her cousin, 'and Erle, who is a philosopher and a friend of mine, and Count Malagrida, an Italian brigand in plain clothes.'

'A brigand!' cried Nelly, 'delightful!' men-

tally forecasting the precise dress in which so miscellaneous an assortment of visitors would be most properly received. 'What is he like, Margaret?'

'Black, fierce, beautiful, of course,' said Margaret, 'with a belt full of pistols and a cave full of diamonds and captured ladies. But let us go upstairs before we frighten ourselves with talking of him.'

Altogether the first evening was a success. Nelly was not slow in appreciating her reception, and departed to her room full of glee.

Margaret, relieved of all anxiety on her behalf, carried her off at last in triumph, and could not resist coming down again to hear in actual words the verdict which Charles's manner had already impliedly pronounced.

'Well?' she said, and her cousin knew well enough how to interpret the inquiry.

'Well, Margaret,' he said, 'she is bewitchingly pretty, beautifully dressed, and ten times more a baby than ever.'

'She is an angel, sir,' said Margaret. 'Find a fault in her if you dare!'

She paused a moment at the door, as if to see if her challenge were accepted—generosity, can-

dour, nobleness written in fair characters in her face, her mock-defiant attitude full of infectious daring, her eye radiant with spirit, yet full of pathos. 'Follow her,' cried the warning voice once again, and Charles took half a step in obedience to the summons. 'Stop!' whispered a craven scruple; 'be sure that she loves you — beware of too much haste; the moment is unpropitious, the hour is late; you have had more than half a quarrel to-night, it will be better to-morrow.'

While he was yet hesitating, the sound of voices outside told him that the opportunity was past.

'To-morrow, you know,' the Squire was saying to Margaret, 'we shall be busy with the Viviens.'

Margaret gave a half-comic sigh of weariness: 'Nelly's first afternoon!' she cried; 'how I wish Clyffe was ten miles farther off!'

'Not so I,' Charles thought to himself; and that night he was once more, in dreamland, galloping in the hunting-field; Florence Vivien was at his side, and Nelly, like some pretty sprite of mischief, hovered nimbly about him; Margaret stood beckoning him towards her, and 'Follow! follow!' seemed to ring through the air, as if a hundred voices urged him to his fate.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST PARALLEL OPENED.

Catherine.—Of all thy suitors, here I charge thee, tell
Whom thou lovest best: see thou dissemble not.

Bianca.—Believe me, sister, of all the men alive
I never yet beheld that special face
Which I could fancy more than any other.

THE Manor was scarcely a show place, and yet there was quite enough that was pretty and curious about it to make it a worthy object of an afternoon's expedition. The Clyffe party took up the scheme with zeal; Florence organised a cavalcade of riders, but was herself obliged to go, much against her will, with the lazy people who preferred a comfortable carriage for a ten miles' journey. Erle, who was indolence itself, acquiesced cheerfully enough in Mrs. Vivien's proposal that he should accompany them. Anstruther in vain petitioned for a seat, but was sent off to show the riders the way and to make himself agreeable: the fourth place was assigned to Malagrida.

Florence was in high spirits, and infected her companions with a talkative mood; Erle for once was prepared to be disputatious.

‘You will see two of our Heavyshire beauties,’ she said to the Count; ‘pray be prepared to go into raptures.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Vivien, ‘and I admire the Squire as much as his granddaughters; he realises all one’s conceptions of a pleasant old age.’

‘If old age can be pleasant,’ said Florence.

‘Not pleasant!’ cried Erle; ‘no people, I assure you, enjoy themselves half so much. It has its proper enjoyments—for one thing, a triumphant consciousness of having survived other people.’

‘And of having nearly done with a troublesome business,’ put in the Count.

‘Love, honour, and troops of friends,’ suggested Mrs. Vivien; ‘does not Macbeth say that?’

‘Troops of friends,’ said Florence, bitterly; ‘that must be a strange sensation; do you know it, Count Malagrida?’

‘To be sure,’ said the Count, pleasantly. ‘Friends are of three sorts: those from whom you expect something; those who expect something from you; and those whom you are watching for the purposes of retaliation.’

‘Let me get out of the carriage,’ said Mrs. Vivien, with a groan.

‘The two last classes,’ continued the Count, unruffled, ‘are what old age abounds in; what is expected of you is—to die; and as to vindictiveness, just look at people’s wills!’

‘Ah!’ said Erle, ‘that explains what one sees in the “Times”—“*Friends* will please accept this intimation.”’

‘Well!’ said Florence, ‘my complaint against old age is, that it is like the rest of life—so aimless: from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, and then from hour to hour—you know the rest.’

‘Oh, yes!’ cried Erle, ‘and thereby hangs a tale—much too grave a one to talk about.’

‘You seem resolved,’ Mrs. Vivien said, complainingly, ‘to have a most disagreeable conversation; I heartily wish you were all riding.’

‘Well,’ said Florence, who enjoyed the vein upon which they had lighted, ‘one age is much the same as another, after all. I declare I see nothing in the world to live for. Why should one exist?’

‘The beautiful and the good,’ said Malagrida, with an air of sincerity, ‘are ends in themselves. Miss Vivien’s *raison d’être* is—Miss Vivien.’

‘Thank you very much,’ said Florence, with a laugh, ‘for being so polite. I congratulate you upon your discrimination. Who knows but some day I may retreat from a frivolous world, turn *dévoté*, become a Mother Superior, and perhaps be known to future ages as St. Florence of—of—’

‘Of Mayfair,’ cried Erle, scoffingly, ‘by all means; only there your worship will have begun before canonisation; let us say, rather, of Clyffe, where you will have had the advantage of my society in becoming ethereal: by the way, is ethereal the word?’

‘No,’ Florence answered, laughing, ‘I am not proposing to become a sprite; but you are a heathen, you know, and naturally choose a Pagan idea.’

‘Do I?’ answered the other; ‘well, in revenge for that I will challenge half of Malagrida’s encomium: seriously, I acquit you of all extraordinary goodness.’

‘And why, pray?’ asked Florence, with a pleased curiosity; ‘why am I not to be good?’

‘First,’ said Erle, ‘you know you trifled with my feelings when I was a little boy—young, foolish, and enthusiastic.’

‘Dreadful offence,’ laughed Florence; ‘and what next?’

‘Next,’ said Erle, ‘you despair of life, as you say, and are entirely objectless: that, you know, is in itself an offence of the very first order.’

‘Heaven forbid!’ cried Florence. ‘Count Malagrida, what is your object in life, and how often in the twenty-four hours are you enthusiastic?’

‘My object,’ said the Count, ‘is to win your approval; and I am enthusiastic as often as I think that I have a chance of succeeding.’

‘How much more agreeable Italians are than these Englishmen!’ said Florence. ‘Count Malagrida, I invite you to come for a drive in my pony-carriage to-morrow.’

‘Delightful!’ cried the Count, ‘and we will explore the philosophy of friendship without the interposition of a mere novice like Erle.’

‘Let us begin at once,’ said Florence: ‘what shall we make the first principle?’

‘Hope nothing, trust no one, and be sure that the oldest acquaintance will treat one the worst.’

‘Obviously,’ said Erle, who had no notion of being left behind, ‘because they know one the best, and see how much there is to dislike.’

‘Which accounts for the vehement way in which relations hate each other,’ said the Count.

‘This is really horrible,’ cried Mrs. Vivien—
‘spare the family, at any rate; consider my feelings as a mother!’

‘A mother!’ exclaimed Malagrida, tenderly; ‘pretty word! excellent artistic subject! as witness half the churches in Italy. Yes, I have seen peasant-girls hanging over their babies by the roadside, who really touched me: but forgive me, Mrs. Vivien, what is the mother as we see her in London?—a shrewd old woman of the world, with two or three equally shrewd young women of the world in charge, ready to dispose of them to the highest bidder!’

‘Monstrous!’ cried Mrs. Vivien; ‘common prudence is the first duty of affection.’

‘My view of the use of relations,’ said Erle, ‘is to give a poignancy to unkindness; for a really chilling effect, commend me to one’s own flesh and blood in an uncongenial mood.’

By this time they were in the Underwood avenue, and Florence for the next hour submitted very graciously to being entertained. She had armed herself with a gold-headed cane and hobbled about, with a half-majestic grace of move-

ment, which contrasted excellently with the comical light in which she placed her misfortune.

The Squire helped her carefully from room to room, and gave her a little lecture on careless horsemanship. 'None of you young ladies,' he said, 'ever take the slightest care of your necks.'

'Indeed I beg your pardon, Mr. Evelyn,' cried Florence; 'I am a most discreet rider, and I dislike tumbling off far too much to do it oftener than I am obliged. It is very disagreeable, you know; one gets dirtied and shaken, and looks very undignified, and tears one's habit, and loses the rest of the day's amusement. If I were always as fortunate as yesterday in my companion the case might be different.'

'Charles,' said Erle, 'Miss Vivien is paying you an elaborate compliment; I hope you're attending.'

Charles, though in another group of talkers, was attending with all his heart, and heard nothing but the pleasant sounds of Florence's talk, gay, rapid, high-spirited. Never had she been in a more brilliant mood than to-day, never more prepared to please, never more mistress of herself. The reception accorded her by the two sisters exactly justified her expectations. Margaret,

struggle as she would, felt shy, uninterested, almost depressed; her attempts at cordiality fell miserably flat; her politeness grew ceremonious; some subtle antipathy of nature seemed to warn them apart; each secretly, under pleasant smiles and kindly speeches, knew the other for a foe. Nelly, on the contrary, began with fright, went on with wonder, and ended in gratitude and admiration. Florence was at once seized with a violent liking for her, and once and again deserting the rest, fixed a pair of kindly, searching eyes upon her, that spoke flatteringly of interest, sympathy, and approval.

‘Take me, please, to see the picture-gallery,’ she said; ‘you have a beautiful Sir Joshua Reynolds, have you not? There, you shall give me your arm, and I shall get on capitally; and tell me, dear, about your school at St. Germain.’

So Nelly, half alarmed at the dignity of her task, led her companion through the gallery, chattered guilelessly on, forgot her timidity, and told the chief pictures’ history, relearnt only that morning, as best she could.

‘Ah! but,’ said Florence, as they turned to go, ‘I like the living Underwood pictures the best; those are what we came to see, you know.’

‘Do you think Margaret pretty?’ asked her companion, blushing scarlet in her embarrassment.

‘Yes,’ Florence said, laughing—‘I admire her and somebody else very much indeed. Come here and let me introduce you to Count Malagrida.’

‘Oh no, please!’ Nelly said, with a half-imploping air; and while she yet stood in a pretty attitude of indecision, with the blush still warm on her cheek, and her Paris dress looking as fresh and beautiful as in a picture-book, the Count himself came up and glided gracefully into the conversation.

‘A little gem,’ he thought to himself, as he scanned the figure before him from head to foot.

‘The brigand,’ thought Nelly, remembering her sister’s description; ‘and oh how I wish Margaret was here!’

Presently Margaret proposed to go to the garden, and Florence acceded at once, and told Erle to come with them; in passing out the three found themselves alone in the conservatory.

‘Here,’ cried Erle, as he came upon the unused garden-chair, ‘is a fortunate discovery; I will

wheel you in this, Miss Vivien, and spare you the labours of your crutch.'

'Excellent!' cried Florence; 'please to wipe the dust off and I will get in at once.'

To Margaret's eye the chair seemed almost sacred; so it did, she well knew, to her grandfather; there it had stood for years past, religiously protected from interference, the last symbol of Mrs. Evelyn's outdoor life—associated, in the minds of both, with the last pathetic period of decline, when—death now almost in sight—every hour has a history and a value of its own, and the mind, pitched above its ordinary strain, endows common acts and words with a pleasant, mournful, half-religious significance. To this, for weeks before Mrs. Evelyn's death, her husband had helped her, day by day more in need of his help, till at last strength and energy failed. From this she had given orders for the garden, whose execution she could never see, and had looked for the last time upon her well-loved flowers. Beside this some of the gravest, saddest, yet most delightful hours of Margaret's existence had been passed. It seemed to her almost desecration for any one else to use it; most of all, that Florence should use it as a jest. Her grand-

father was close behind, and she could gauge by her own feelings the sort of shock which the sight of an unaccustomed familiarity would give him. On this day, moreover, she guarded his sensitiveness with especial care; for, since he had become a widower, hospitalities at the Manor House had been rare, and were generally the signal for a mood of more than usual melancholy. She resolved to speak; but trivial as the matter was, it cost her an unexpected effort; the very fact that it did so convinced her of its necessity.

‘We had better not take the chair,’ she said, ‘if you can manage without it. It belonged to some one who is dead, and my grandfather would scarcely like it used in fun.’

Florence, one foot already upon it, turned round in surprise, and with difficulty repressed the angry sneer that trembled on her lips. Could anything be more utterly insignificant? yet what trifle is too small to fan the flame of dislike? There seemed something ignominious in dismounting at another person’s injunction, and though it only *seemed*, Florence felt a pang shoot through her heart, and did not care to explain it away. Was it rude that Margaret should speak as she had, or fanciful, or unfortu-

nate? She knew not; what she did know, was that an unreasoning animosity grew hot within her, and that, before she could define the injury, she longed for revenge.

Malagrida, following with Nelly, appeared to have forgotten his cynical mood, and with a tenderness, half paternal, half chivalrous, was tempting her from reserve into a child-like garrulity.

Still in the prime of life, and still from head to foot in the very highest possible preservation, the Count loved sometimes to speak of himself as a man whose young days were over, and who took a merely speculative interest in the pleasures, anxieties, and passions of a world from which he was already half estranged. He liked to be regarded in the light of an interesting, picturesque, majestic wreck, and he added very materially to the effect of his grace and his wit by hinting at a period when both shone even brighter than at present. It is possible, moreover, that having enlisted early in the service of a certain unmentionable potentate, and obeyed him unremittingly ever since, he may have felt at times depressed by the monotony of the employment, and, like Alexander sighing over the limits of a conquered world,

have longed for the luxury of an unimagined crime, or for an eleventh commandment upon which to whet his flagging appetite. Be that as it may, he had at times a touch of melancholy in his demeanour; and Nelly presently regarded him with a kind of pitying awe, and acquiesced submissively in the patronising tone of familiarity which he adopted towards her.

Meanwhile Florence and her companion had relapsed into the strain which had so horrified Mrs. Vivien on the morning's drive; and Margaret's presence added a fresh piquancy to the highly-flavoured dish that suited the appetites of both so well.

'Yes,' Florence was saying, 'if I had to manage mankind, Talleyrand's injunction to his people should be the general law: "Surtout, messieurs, pas de zèle;" enthusiasm is no doubt the bane of existence.'

'No,' said Margaret, who had warmed with the controversy; 'it is the only thing that makes mankind worth the trouble of managing. Who would be queen of a world of triflers?'

'Both Mr. Erle and myself would be delighted to be your subjects,' said the Count, who at this moment came up, rather tired of Nelly's confi-

dences. 'But I am in arms against Miss Vivien: the enthusiasm of the mass is the only thing that makes it manageable at all. The mob—that is, ninety-nine hundredths of the species to which we have the honour of belonging—have to be guarded against and kept down just like the other wild beasts and domestic animals.'

'Stop!' cried Margaret; 'a great deal more than a nineteenth of the world is civilised.'

'Civilised!' exclaimed the Count, in astonishment; 'excuse me, indeed the fraction is too high. Just go into any crowd—a ball, a church, a promenade—you find yourself surrounded by sleek gentlemen, interesting mothers of families, young men and maidens, nice little children and so forth—all look tame, peaceable, and in order. Well, you know, as a fact, they are all savages—they bite, and growl, and snap, and would hurt you if they could; and though they are taught to simper, and smile, and make courtesies, and kneel at the proper places in the service, they are in reality wild, one's natural enemies. Watch, feed, caress them as you will, the first moment they dare, you will get a bite.'

'Now that you suggest it,' said Margaret, with

a laugh, 'I begin to feel a little disposed to bite myself—pray take care!'

'No, no,' cried Erle; 'all of us are in the civilised minority: we look as like the savages as we can for the purpose of managing them.'

'Yes,' added the Count; 'some one says, very wisely, that one cannot master the bad passions of the race except by sharing in the good—that is, of course, by seeming to share in those which it is the fashion to consider good.'

Margaret was amused; nor did it ever occur to her that any of those who joined in the conversation were serious. 'I object,' she said, 'altogether to your version of the maxim. There are such things, Count Malagrida, as good and bad, are there not?'

'Granted,' said the Count, politely, just as he would have acquiesced in two and two making five, had Margaret asked him.

'And true and false?'

'I do not know about that,' put in Erle. 'Some philosopher or other said that the only reason that the axioms of geometry were universally admitted was, that no one had any interest in denying them.'

'Miss St. Aubyn is right,' said the Count.

‘One admits some of the favourite prejudices of mankind as a common standing-ground for demonstrating one’s own superiority—they are the counters with which your game is to be played. Suppose we say that truth is anything to which you can get a sufficient number of respectable people to adhere.’

‘And in support of which there is sufficient amount of capital invested,’ cried Erle. ‘You know what the conservative Frenchman said to some pretty scheme of improvement: “Oui, et mes gages, qui est-ce qui les paierait?”’

‘The world is moved by people who do not care about their wages,’ said Margaret; and thereupon Florence, who was beginning to get tired of the conversation, resolved to break it off.

‘Both of you dreary people,’ she said to the two men, as the Count moved forward with Margaret, ‘are no doubt terribly right; one’s drum is hollow, and one’s doll stuffed with straw, and the world a moral wilderness.’

‘*Your* doll,’ said Erle, turning to Nelly, ‘has had no such dreadful discoveries made about it, I hope?’

‘I have not had a doll for a great while,’ she said, with a rather doubtful laugh, and feeling

very modest at the thought of the advanced period at which she had indulged in so juvenile a recreation. 'My last one was all wax.'

'Happy, happy being!' cried Erle, with a sigh in which Nelly in vain tried to find any mockery. 'All wax! a thought to drive wicked old people, like Miss Vivien and myself, half crazy with jealousy!'

'I do not in the least understand you,' said Nelly, with a puzzled, half-frightened look which became her extremely; 'but I don't think that Miss Vivien looks either old or wicked.'

'That is right,' cried Florence; 'at last I am appreciated; we will be friends, and I will begin by calling you Nelly; and now if only Mr. Erle would go away, we might exchange all sorts of pretty sentiments, and be delightfully confidential in this pleasant wood.'

'How idyllic a scene!' said Erle, as he turned away. 'Miss St. Aubyn, I leave you in dangerous hands; and if you cherish any pretty illusions, take care!'

'Tell me what he means,' said Nelly, taking her companion's arm, as if half for protection. 'Are you really dangerous?'

'Not in the least,' answered Florence, with a

laugh. 'It is quite natural for you to dislike Mr. Erle.'

'I did not say that,' said Nelly, blushing to find her thoughts read, almost before she herself had known them.

'You said it with your eyes,' said the other; 'a very easy language to read, you know, if one only learns it.'

'Is it?' said Nelly; 'and what else have you read to-day?'

'Shall I tell you?' said Florence. 'Well, since we are to be confidential and great friends, I will. It concerns yourself. Now begin to blush as much as you please. Yours are not the only eyes I can read.'

'Are they not?' asked Nelly, frightened out of her wits at what might be coming.

'A very handsome pair of soft blue eyes, that grow wonderfully eloquent every time they fall in a certain direction.'

'And what do they say?' said the other.

'Little hypocrite!' cried Florence; 'you cannot guess in the least, I suppose?'

'I cannot,' said Nelly, 'and I declare I do not know whose eyes you mean.'

'Le beau cousin,' answered Florence. 'And,

you dear little piece of innocence, what do you think of him? You love him, don't you?'

'Yes,' said Nelly, with simplicity—'of course, I always have—at least—'

'At least what?'

'Since we were very little, and he used to break my playthings, and be a horrible tease. We three are like brothers and sisters, you know.'

'Are you?' said Florence; 'but I mean something else than that. What a pretty cheek you have, dear—and how I like to make it blush!'

'I am telling you the truth,' said Nelly. 'I have never thought of him but in one way. He is much greater friends with Margaret than with me.'

Florence tapped her hand with a gentle mockery, and burst out into the most incredulous of laughs.

'You are both of you extremely in love with one another,' she said; 'and if it is news to you, it would not, I am sure, be so to your cousin.'

'You think not?' said Nelly, wonderingly. 'I am sure I knew nothing about it.'

'You must not think me very impertinent,' said Florence. 'You know I am a privileged old

maid; besides I am very much in love with you myself.'

Florence could fascinate when she chose, and Nelly felt herself under the spell. Afterwards she searched her heart; and being quite distrustful of herself, and deeply impressed with Florence's penetration, resolved that upon both points she must be right. Florence had spilt the drop of gall, and the innocence of a young life was already half destroyed.

CHAPTER VIII.

FURENS QUID FEMINA POSSIT.

—— c'est la Sirène
 Guettant sa proie au bord des eaux ;
 Malheur à celui qu'elle entraîne
 Jusqu'à sa couche de roseaux !

IF the afternoon's events had disturbed Nelly, they had not been without their effect upon the Clyffe party. Florence descried an arena of amusement very welcome to her present wearisome inactivity. She had confirmed her prejudice against one sister, and had taken a great liking to the other ; Margaret she felt was her match, and, with a courageous pugnacity, she half wished for a battle with so worthy an antagonist. Dignity, simplicity, and a delicate insight were matched against a practised wit, familiarity with the world, and perfect self-reliance. The battle was likely to be well contested, and Florence felt a not altogether unpleasant anxiety as to its result. Even in good

looks she mistrusted her superiority ; for though she had often enough tested the efficacy of her own, there was something in Margaret's bearing that was strangely impressive. Her beauty was of an order, quiet, pure, and, so far from dazzling, that the eye seemed only gradually educated to appreciate its worth. The admiration which it excited, if less readily expressed, would probably, Florence felt, be something more profound and earnest than the easily-turned compliments of which she reaped so plentiful a crop. Moreover, the calm, serious, studied kindness of manner with which Margaret treated her, seemed to imply a lurking sentiment of pity, or scorn, or disapproval—all three intolerably distasteful to Florence's vanity. She tried, in her turn, to feel contemptuous, but tried in vain : Margaret inspired her with an uneasiness which was not to be ignored. Failing indifference, Florence resolved upon war, and each new circumstance added vehemence to her resolution. Radical as her father painted her, there was a touch of the mischief-maker in her composition which inclined her to disarrange any constituted authority. Her love of disturbance in the abstract was now quickened by zeal against an individual. Margaret, she could see, was the pre-

siding spirit at the Manor ; it was a little empire, yet enough to grudge to an enemy. She ruled the Squire, her sister, her cousin, without an effort, unconsciously on her part and theirs, but with all the more completeness. She should do so, Florence resolved, no longer. Nelly, she chose to believe, was oppressed, and with Nelly she resolved forthwith to side. Charles seemed like a puppet in her hands, the prize of the encounter, to be assigned to this side or that, as the fortunes of the day should turn. It would be a pleasant triumph to win him for the weaker antagonist ; it would be pleasant to humble that calm, indifferent, majestic nature ; it would be pleasant to contrive, and see one's contrivances effectual ; above everything, pleasant to have a little admiring, grateful dependent, moving obedient at beck and call, and accepting joyously the results of one's superior prowess. So ran Florence's dream, half-meddlesome, half-resentful, short-sighted, selfish, superficial, and fatally perilous to the happiness of those whose fortunes fell within its scope.

That evening they discussed their new acquaintance at Clyffe. Erle's high spirits of the afternoon had been succeeded by a quiet mood ; he was sitting silent on a distant sofa, when

Florence came up and rallied him on his stupidity.

‘Forgive me,’ he said, as he got up, yielding her his place, and presently subsiding into an arm-chair at her side. ‘I have been indulging in a reverie. My old friend Charlie Evelyn seems to me one of the luckiest young fellows in England.’

‘Luckiest?’ cried Florence, inquisitive to know upon what her companion’s thoughts were running — ‘for having that dear old Squire as his grandfather, or for being heir of Underwood, or for his silly blue eyes, or for what, I wonder?’

‘For charming companionship,’ said the other. ‘Miss St. Aubyn is distinctly adorable.’

‘Adorable?’ said Florence, quickly, surprised at her companion’s unusual enthusiasm. ‘Please to translate that into prose.’

‘It means,’ said Erle, ‘that she is beautiful, refined, unconscious, and of a goodness that makes one blush for one’s existence.’

‘Makes *you* blush for your existence, I suppose you mean,’ said Florence. ‘I can quite imagine it. However, the greatest saints like being adored, and I advise you to ride over to-morrow, and make her an offer.’

‘I should be sorry to pay her so poor a com-

pliment,' said Erle. 'Besides, my performances in that line are things of the romantic land of long ago. I assure you I take a merely artistic view of her perfections.'

'Well,' Florence said, 'jealous as of course I am, and blind in consequence, I agree in your verdict. Miss St. Aubyn is grave, beautiful, and a good subject for a Madonna. I can scarcely help worshipping her myself.'

Erle was delighted to have found a weapon with which he could annoy Florence, as he perceived he did. He had admired Margaret, and he now began to value his admiration as a useful weapon of attack.

'Yes,' he said; 'you might easily say your prayers before a worse shrine. I fancy her some forgotten Madonna—Raphael's gentlest, most un-earthly masterpiece.'

Florence looked by no means impressed. 'Let us ask Captain Anstruther,' she said, as the young soldier came up. 'Captain Anstruther, here is Mr. Erle in a very despondent and sentimental mood, and becoming quite dangerously poetical. Come, please, and cheer him up, and give us your opinion of the Underwood beauties.'

‘L’Allegra and Penserosa?’ cried Anstruther.
‘I am for l’Allegra.’

‘You forget,’ said Erle, ‘that Anstruther is only a little boy, and, I dare say, has play-drum at home to match the young lady’s wax-doll; indeed, being in the Guards is only playing at soldiers, after all, is it not, Anstruther?’

‘Well,’ said Anstruther, ‘I am l’Allegra’s knight, and pin her badge to my sleeve. Penserosa is too lofty.’

‘Yes,’ cried Florence—

‘She is all fault who hath no fault at all;
For who loves me must have a touch of earth.’

‘So say not I,’ cried Erle, delighted to find how much interest Florence took in his latest mood.
‘A good thing cannot possibly be too good.’

‘Did you ever hear anything like it?’ said Florence, appealing to her other companion; ‘our poor friend is evidently struck at last.’

‘It is a melancholy sight,’ said Anstruther, ‘and a just retribution!’

‘Neither of you,’ said Erle, ‘have the least chance of laughing me out of my convictions. You gave me some Tennyson just now, now listen to Mrs. Browning:—

‘ ——— her face is lily-clear,
Lily-shaped, and dropped in duty,
To the law of its own beauty.

Oval cheeks, encoloured faintly,
Which a trail of golden hair
Keeps from fading off to air :

And a forehead fair and saintly,
Which two blue eyes undershine,
Like meek prayers before a shrine.’

‘ Meek prayers before a shrine ! ’ repeated Florence, in a tone of amused and wondering incredulity. ‘ Well, Mr. Erle, marvels will never cease, I suppose.’

‘ A beautiful description,’ continued Erle, undisturbed, ‘ and taken, I feel convinced, from the young lady in question. All I know is, that if I were a lucky young fellow, like Anstruther there, with youth, beauty, virtue, and a competence, I should lay them all at her feet, without a moment’s hesitation.’

‘ All four ? ’ said Florence, with a touch of contempt ; ‘ that would indeed be generous. Well, you will not have to wait long to do homage, for they are to stay here next week.’

‘ Then,’ said Erle, ‘ I shall certainly ask Mrs. Vivien to let me lengthen my visit.’

‘ And so shall I,’ cried Anstruther. ‘ L’Allegra quite haunts me ! ’

‘I hope you will be charitable enough to ask Charlie, too,’ said Erle. ‘If appearances may be trusted, he is pretty much of the same opinion as myself.’

‘We have asked the whole party,’ said Florence, ‘adored and adorers alike. Meanwhile, pray come and console yourself with some Beethoven.’

Erle’s admiration for Margaret put the finishing touch to the animosity with which Florence regarded her. His enthusiasm was evidently affected, and yet it had sincerity enough about it to be intensely annoying. For years she had been accustomed to regard him in the light of a rejected suitor—her own, if she chose to have him. Another attachment startled her, as almost a desertion. Their intimacy, though by no means affectionate, was thorough, real, and of long enough standing to clash with the idea of a new alliance. If Erle decried the sex, at any rate he paid her the compliment of decrying it *to her*, and she could ill brook that his confidences should be whispered in another’s ear. That Margaret should usurp her prescriptive right—that hers should be the hand to administer a blow so damaging to prestige, so humiliating to vanity, was a contingency which, however remote its probability, it

was torture even to think of. Florence felt the hot blood flash into her cheeks at the mere idea of so cruel a defeat, and eager fancy crowded her mind at once with a hundred remorseless schemes of self-defence and retribution. What would not be lawful in such a warfare? what vengeance could possibly atone for so deadly an affront?

A few days later the Underwood party arrived, and Florence found herself forthwith committed to the campaign, whose outline she had already dimly forecast. Erle and Anstruther both stayed on, as they had threatened, and neither seemed in the least danger of repenting their decision. Nelly arrived in a flutter of excitement, delighted with an opportunity of displaying her Paris treasures, and presented a combination of coquetry and bashfulness which even Malagrida acknowledged was delightful. To Erle she seemed a baby, and a baby not of the most interesting description. He saw that she was the creature of foibles, and it amused him to play with them. He vied with the Count in paying her elaborate compliments; he asked her opinion with a flattering gravity; and talked to her about her wax-doll with an interest that fairly passed her comprehension. Florence saw that she was

frightened, and enjoyed the process of mystifying her.

‘Tell me about Mr. Erle,’ she said, one day.

‘Oh,’ said Florence, ‘you must be courageous, and he will do you no harm. He is very alarming, of course, but I keep him in great order.’

‘What is he?’ asked Nelly.

‘What?’ cried Florence; ‘well, I will tell you;’ and she pretended to look round the room, came close up to her companion, and whispered into her ear the close of Auber’s pretty song—“*Diavolo, Diavolo, Diavolo!*”

‘What do you mean?’ said Nelly, thoroughly puzzled.

‘I am quite in earnest,’ said the other. ‘Seriously, he is a fop, a cynic, a hardened flirt, and, in short, Mephistopheles.’

‘Mephistopheles?’ said Nelly, in a tone of awe.

‘Yes,’ said her companion, ‘and gobbles up a nice little innocent like you, whenever he can catch one. So, beware!’

‘Well,’ said Nelly, tossing her head with the most becomingly childish pout; ‘he is a great deal too patronising; he talks to me as if I still wore pinafores, and he were a hundred and fifty.’

‘Of course,’ cried Florence, ‘and so he is, and

a great deal more too. You forget who I told you he was; but I will take care of you.'

Nelly speedily accepted the proffered intimacy; Florence constantly befriended her; showed a kind watchfulness for her enjoyment; petted her into being outspoken, and, one by one, by a gentle extortion, dragged the little innocent secrets of her heart—her baby loves, her vague ambition, her tiny coquetries, her shallow, half-grown sentiment from their hiding-place.

'Do you know,' said Florence, caressingly, 'you have quite bewitched me? What is your spell, I wonder?'

'You like me?' said Nelly, delighted, and yet half-alarmed at her audacity; 'well, so do I you. Do you think me very bold?'

'I think you a dear little frightened goose, and I shall have a new baby-house to keep you in. I want pets, you know; you see I can get no one to marry me, and I never had a sister.'

'Ah,' said Nelly, 'that must be terrible. Margaret is my other self.'

'And you have no corner in your heart for me, then?' asked Florence, 'or for that naughty cousin of yours?'

‘I thought,’ said Nelly, ‘you had forgotten all about that. I am sure I had.’

She knew, as she spoke, that she was telling a monstrous fib, and her glowing cheeks saved Florence the trouble of refutation.

There were some points, however, on which Nelly did not choose to be explicit with anyone but her sister.

‘I like them all, dear Meg,’ she said, in a private conference before her bedroom fire, all but—’

‘But who?’ inquired her sister.

‘Mr. Erle.’ And here she gave a shudder, more expressive than words.

‘Dear me!’ said Margaret, ‘I had not made up my mind; I think he is by no means the worst of the party.’

‘Don’t you?’ said Nelly. ‘I cannot bear him. What do you think, Meg—is he laughing at me? Does he mean to mock me? how could he know about my doll? I see him laugh secretly when he speaks to me, and I blush the moment he looks at me. How I wish he was gone!’

‘I would not trouble my head about him,’ said Margaret. ‘He is only a fine gentleman, brought here to make the parties amusing; but he is not

near so patronising as that tiresome Sir Agricola, nor as insipid as the young officer, Captain ——, who was it?’

‘Anstruther,’ said Nelly. ‘Oh, but, do you know, he is charming, I assure you.’

‘I like the other best,’ said Margaret. ‘How good his stories were! But Charlie is far the nicest of them all, is he not?’

Both sisters kept clear of Florence, for about her they knew instinctively that they should disagree. Already a subtle something had crept between their loves.

Charles, on his arrival, had been surprised to find Erle still among the Clyffe guests.

‘I thought,’ he said, ‘he was to be at Lord Almerfield’s for the *battue* to-day?’

‘So he was,’ said Florence; ‘but he changed his mind.’

‘He found himself too well amused?’ suggested the other.

‘No,’ said Florence; ‘it was out of no compliment to us, as he took care to inform us. It was not till he heard you were coming that he resolved to stay.’

‘I thought he was so fond of shooting?’

‘Ah,’ said Florence, ‘but pheasants are not the

only things that people like to kill. And now I shall tell you no more.'

Charles was occasionally obtuse, and his thoughts always centred on himself.

'What in the world,' he wondered, 'can Erle want with me?'

Erle made it very speedily evident that he wanted nothing, and before many days Charles began to perceive his mistake.

'What sort of sportsman do you think he is?' Florence asked him, one evening, when Erle had persuaded Margaret to sing him some favourite air, and was tempting her, by a sudden display of musical enthusiasm, to linger at the piano—'What sort of sportsman do you think he is, Mr. Evelyn? And what much better shooting there is in our drawing-room than in Lord Almerfield's coverts, is there not?'

Charles, by this time, understood perfectly, and was by no means delighted with the discovery. Though courage and opportunity to speak had failed him, his cousin must, he thought, have gathered some intimation of his secret attachment. If so, what a woman's caprice was this for another's homage; if not, how strange a blindness to his own; in either case, how good a right for

him to feel aggrieved. Florence watched and enjoyed his distress and abetted his secret indignation. It suited her mood that Margaret should be seen engaged in an ordinary flirtation. She disliked her so thoroughly that it cost her no effort, and but little hypocrisy, to represent all that she did in a disagreeable light.

Her feeling, as she indulged it, and nursed it, and toiled for it, grew strangely vehement. The enemy whom she was attacking seemed to be more than her match. Other young ladies were afraid of her, eclipsed by her cleverness, and were ready to conciliate by flattery or submission. Margaret, on the contrary, was perfectly unawed, and held her own, with an unconscious dignity that was especially provoking. Florence laboured and contrived and dazzled, and at last scarcely won what the other obtained without an effort. Erle, though half in play, admired her, Florence could not help seeing, with an enthusiasm that she did not remember him to have exhibited towards herself. When she sat down to sing, her ear told her that there was a touch of genius in the strain, and a fascination about it, that her own more elaborate performance was quite without. Once when she had been looking at Margaret for a few moments, and turned

round suddenly to the mirror, she was quite startled to see how haggard and anxious she looked by the other's simple and effortless beauty. She was handsome; yes, indeed, how many people had told her so; but she was too good a judge not to know that the other's very unconsciousness was a charm far more irresistible than the cleverest finesse, the most brilliant talk, or highest result of art. Her soul grew black within her: the last scruple died away, and she resolved on victory at any price.

To such a mood opportunities are seldom wanting. Charles was impressed with her superior sagacity, and listened, at first with patience and then greedily, to the poisonous hints that she whispered at his ear. She spoke with an ostentatious deference that Charles felt was only in mockery of his own opinion, and by degrees he grew ashamed of his simplicity.

‘What!’ she would say, ‘Margaret like balls?’

‘Why not?’ asked Charles.

‘Well,’ said Florence, ‘I fancied you were all too angelic at Underwood for anything so commonplace.’

By degrees he caught from her something of a sneering mood. She pursed up her lips and looked

demure when Margaret spoke, and let Charles thoroughly understand that she disbelieved her sanctity. Sometimes the attack was openly conducted.

‘I am horribly malicious, you know, and like to lower every one I can; but tell me, is your cousin the paragon of innocence she looks?’

For the first time in his life it occurred to Charles to doubt it. ‘How penetrating women are!’ he thought; ‘and how blindly we worship at the altars where we are first taught to kneel!’

A few more hints, a few more days convinced him that Margaret was, at any rate, unsaintly enough to be laying siege to Erle. Florence, while she let him know that she too observed it, explained it pleasantly away. ‘Mr. Erle, you know, is irresistible. I have been telling your cousin he is Mephistopheles; and, by the way, Mr. Evelyn, did you ever read “Faust?”’

‘Yes,’ said Charles; ‘but why?’

‘The heroine ought to interest you; but, seriously, I do not think you need be alarmed—*on revient toujours*—you know.’

‘I declare I do not know in the least what you mean,’ Charles said, growing red as her meaning broke upon him.

‘*On revient toujours,*’—said Florence, unmoved—‘be that your consolation.’

Charles began to comprehend that Margaret was not above the conquests of her sex. She had been in possession of his heart, she was now laying siege to Erle’s, and, comforting reflection!—she might some day come back to him. Pride caught fire at the suggestion, and every affectionate act or word of Margaret’s, for the future, was poisoned to his taste.

They who wish to go wrong may be sure of Fortune’s assistance; and one unlucky chance after another strengthened Charles’s conviction, and inflamed his angry mood.

One fine afternoon there was to be an excursion to a neighbour on whom all were anxious to call. The carriage, which had to go a few miles round, was to start first: the rest of the party, Margaret and her grandfather and Florence, were to ride half an hour afterwards. Nelly had already taken her seat beside Mrs. Vivien, and Erle was just proposing to join them, when Margaret came running downstairs. ‘Mr. Erle,’ she said, ‘can you give my grandfather those extracts from Lord Ascot’s speech that you promised him for this evening’s post?’

‘My goodness! I had absolutely forgotten,’ cried Erle; ‘but I will do it forthwith. Here, Charles, if Mrs. Vivien will accept such a bad substitute, will you take my place in the carriage? and I will follow you in half an hour with the rest of the party.’

Erle went away to fulfill his promise, and Nelly drew a long breath of relief at the unexpected deliverance. Charles, as he got into the carriage, looked up at Florence, and read in her eyes a smile, a wicked smile; for it said, as plainly as words could have spoken, ‘See how her purpose is effected—she wanted Erle. She has gratified her want by a sly trick.’ Charles would have denied and resented the words, but the smile was incapable of refutation, and it sank into his heart. Did Margaret, the pure, the guileless—did she, like a common mortal, love, and scheme, and envy, and play her little ruses, a calm, smiling hypocrite—and how profound the hypocrisy—a horrid thought. Charles did not quite admit it, but he did not drive it away, and it lurked, a subtle poison festering about his heart, a vile suspicion. Margaret looked so good, so absolutely innocent, that it seemed absolutely shocking to think of her as the victim of an ordinary caprice,

and as using a vulgar stratagem. To be jealous of her sister, to indulge her jealousy by a false pretence, to trade on her affection for her grandfather ! the very thought was profanation ; but it lingered in Charles's mind, and while its venom was distilling, his evil genius spread yet another snare for his unwary feet.

Both Margaret and Florence were artists, and Margaret's portfolio especially gave ample evidence of her summer diligence. Florence, for once in a placable mood, was exploring its treasures, and came at last upon a little sketch of the Underwood lawn, with a piece of a gable of the house, and a few yards of hop-wreathed verandah. ' I am going to carry this off, if I may,' she had said. ' What a nice corner you have chosen, and how sunny you have made it all look !'

' Do take it,' Margaret answered, glad of an opportunity of outwardly belying the dislike which she was conscious of harbouring against her companion. ' But it is not half finished : let me fill in the foreground for you.'

' No, no,' cried Florence ; ' sit just where you are, and I will put you in myself ; sitting there in the shade of the lime-tree, your figure will recall the whole scene to me more than anything.'

Florence was excellent at portraiture, and now the whim seized her to be elaborately exact, and to put forth all the skill at her command. The smallness of the scale made the task a hard one, and would have justified any imperfection; but she resolved that her part of the picture should not be the worst: a quick eye for outline, used often for the purposes of caricature, enabled her speedily to catch the striking points of the desired form. In a few strokes she gave the small, finely-shaped head, the delicate neck, the easy attitude, natural, dignified, and, as she joyously declared, unmistakeable.

‘There!’ she said; ‘so much for the drapery. Now let me try the face: turn a little away, please, and show me the profile.’

Margaret, pleased to humour her, sat patiently on, as again and again Florence, more intent than ever on success, paused to consider the precise effect of some new tint, to fix the rightful incidence of a shade, or to retouch some line which failed to satisfy her eye. At last the task was done. Margaret confessed, and was delighted with, the resemblance; and Florence, already half wearying with a too-sustained effort, transferred

the sketch without another thought to the depth of her portfolio.

‘What do you think of that?’ she said to Erle a day or two afterwards, as he leant over the table where she was busy with her paint-box. ‘That is something you have not seen yet—Underwood in its summer attire. Is it not a pretty sketch?’

‘Very nice indeed,’ said Erle, ‘but not at all in your style. Whose pretty handiwork is it, I wonder?’

‘I wonder!’ said Florence, with an air of mystery: ‘the figure, however, is mine. You recognise it, of course?’

‘I really had not observed,’ answered the other. ‘Oh, yes, now I do. Well, that is very cleverly managed, indeed.’

‘And exactly like?’ said Florence.

‘No,’ said Erle, with a laugh: ‘there is a grace about Miss St. Aubyn which defies caricature.’

‘Caricature!’ cried Florence, in indignation. ‘I assure you I took the greatest pains with it.’

‘Well,’ said Erle, with a petitionary air, ‘I am going to pay you the sincerest of all compliments. Be good-natured, and give it to me.’

‘Give it you!’ said Florence. ‘How have you courage to ask it? Impossible!’

‘Then I won’t come to your theatricals,’ said Erle, with a laugh.

‘That is a cogent argument, indeed,’ replied his companion; ‘for I look to you entirely to arrange them: but you will not be so mean as to make terms.’

‘Will I not?’ said Erle: ‘and mean, indeed! Why should I come and be your stage-manager, and drill the Miss Dangerfields, and have interviews with all sorts of horrid people, and take a world of trouble, and all for nothing?’

‘I believe you will do it out of kindness to us,’ said Florence.

‘Interesting credulity!’ exclaimed the other: ‘you take a most flattering view of my good-nature; but no, nothing but the picture will buy me.’

‘How conceited you are!’ said Florence.

‘Yes,’ answered Erle: ‘that is one of the reasons of my good acting. I shall be a great loss.’

‘I cannot afford to lose you,’ said Florence, with a sigh. ‘Well, I consent; but I think you very shabby.’

‘Only give me the picture,’ replied Erle.

And Florence thereupon reluctantly resigned her treasure.

‘But,’ she said, ‘you must promise me faithfully to tell no one how you came by it.’

‘Conquerors,’ said her companion, ‘can afford to be generous. I promise as you wish.’

CHAPTER IX.

HOW HAPPY COULD I BE WITH EITHER.

Love has daily perils, such
 As none foresee and none control;
 And hearts are strung, so that one touch,
 Careless or rough, may mar the whole.

A FRENCH lady, well skilled in the philosophy of the affections and the management of mankind, has thrown out an ingenious hint as to the danger of being too confidential.

‘Malheur,’ she says, ‘à l’imprudente qui demande à celui qu’elle aime le secret de ses chagrins! Malheur à la femme qui permet à l’homme qu’elle aime de lui confier ces tourments-là. Elle perd dès ce moment la faculté de l’en distraire, et il la quittera pour aller les oublier auprès de celle qui les ignore.’

It was for some such reason as this, probably, that Florence found her empire over Erle departing from her. She knew his least agreeable mood

too well for him to be able to forget it in her presence. He was tired of the monotonous sarcasm to which her society condemned him, and of the sceptical indifference on which both met as common standing-ground. It was a view of life, true, possibly, but dull; and it was annoying to be forbidden to escape from it. Margaret possessed the rare merit of being absolutely a stranger to every idea of the kind; and, moving in an atmosphere of high spirits, interest, and enthusiasm, which it was a luxury to breathe, she attracted him by a pleasant opposition, far more piquant than the other's tedious acquiescence. Partly to annoy Florence, partly to amuse himself, Erle set himself studiously to be agreeable; and Margaret's conversation with her sister seemed to imply that he had not been entirely unsuccessful. He said things, indeed, that sounded heartless and wicked; yet they left her with but a faint impression of either cruelty or vice. His sardonic paradoxes seemed palpably unreal, and they were amusingly expressed. He criticised her songs with a feeling admiration; and spoke so ardently about his favourite airs, that it seemed impossible that he should be altogether bad. His conversation aroused an agreeable inquisitiveness and a

conscious power. His very remoteness from her put her at her ease; and she accepted his politeness with the unruffled calmness of complete indifference. That so great a man could really admire her, or that she, under any possible circumstances, could come to do more than tolerate him, it may be safely affirmed, never for a moment crossed her mind.

Such a relationship, however, admits easily of misinterpretation; and Florence, whose vanity it so sorely pricked, found no difficulty in using it to humble Margaret in her cousin's eyes. With him she had already become thoroughly intimate; and Charles, delighted at talking confidentially for the first time in his life with a woman older than himself, allowed her readily enough to touch on delicate topics. She assured herself of her standing-ground as she went, and at last made no secret of what she considered his position. He might, so her hints suggested to him, marry whichever of his cousins he chose, and Margaret, when her flirtation with Erle was disposed of, would probably wish that the choice should fall on her.

‘Ah!’ he said to her one day, at Underwood, ‘this is the scene of our juvenile romance. I

remember standing under this tree, and your giving me back my flower, and calling me a monster.'

'Did I?' said Florence; 'well, Mr. Evelyn, that did my penetration great credit, because I think you are a monster of a very dangerous description.'

'Pray explain,' said Charles.

'No,' said Florence; 'I like to be enigmatical, so I will tell you a story. The last time I went to the Zoological Gardens, I saw a serpent fed; two little rabbits, a tender morsel each, were skipping about its den, and the old wretch, with a murderous eye on either victim, could not make up its mind which first to devour.'

'I am more in the dark than ever,' said Charles; 'which am I, the rabbits or the serpent?'

'Don't interrupt the story,' cried Florence. 'Both victims were fascinated; and at last the big one was in such a hurry to be eaten, that it drove the little one into a corner, and came and jumped down the serpent's throat, and got gobbled up in a moment. Was not that interesting?'

'I am uncommonly stupid, I suppose,' said Charles; 'but what, pray, is the moral of the story?'

‘The moral,’ said Florence, privately thinking that Charles’s opinion of himself was rather near the truth: ‘Take care that no rabbits jump down your throat.’

Charles, when he came to know what she meant, felt a little gratified at the discovery of so agreeable a position: it flattered his vanity, and it occurred to him that he might do well to exercise his privilege. Of another’s feelings in the matter it did not occur to him at that moment to take a thought. If fortune threw two such pieces of prey in his way, and social law forbade him to take more than one, who could be aggrieved at his enjoyment of his right? Of promises unspoken, yet truly made; of a relation too subtle and delicate for even thought to put into an explicit shape, yet none the less real; of a faithlessness, which no one could bring against him, except the silent voice of his own heart, he was too full of enjoyment just then to think. Nor indeed was his intercourse with Margaret as pleasant as of old. He was throwing himself eagerly into Florence’s mood, and Margaret constantly found herself out of tune with him. There was a delicacy about her, which he regarded as prudish; a simplicity which seemed tame, a pure-mindedness that

Florence taught him to admire as pretty, but to regard as weak. The Squire, who was old-fashioned in his notions, and the victim of a morbid modesty, had the strictest idea of what sort of things should be discussed before young ladies, and used to grow extremely embarrassed when Florence occasionally gave evidence of a less precise *régime*. That there was such a thing as sin in the world ; that some young men had to be described vaguely as ‘ wild ; ’ that there were some things and people which could not be described at all, was quite as much experience as he thought essential or desirable for his granddaughters, or as he cared to realise for himself. Florence had seen the world, and had heard it, all her life, frankly discussed ; she had been quite familiar with young men who were wild, and she knew what wildness meant ; she could joke with them about it, and affected no innocent ignoring of what went on before her eyes. Young men were generally profligate ; and it was only another form of Eastern exclusiveness that tried to shut out the fact from the other half of the species.

The Squire more than once broke off the conversation with an awkward abruptness that betrayed his discomfort, and devoutly wished him-

self well rid of her society. Charles, on the other hand, felt there was something real, courageous, and natural about her. The Squire and his cousins lived in a little fool's paradise; but the real men and women who made the world, who fairly lived out their lives, who ran through the real course of human passion and feeling, talked in a different manner from these pretty proprieties. Florence struck the bolder note, and drowned her rival's gentle strain in a rude discord.

To such a frame of mind grievances are never wanting. Each new accident is swept into the current, and lends it a new force. Charles easily persuaded himself that he was the injured party. Erle sent him one day to a drawer, in search of a cigar, and there, stowed away with other treasures, Charles came upon the picture of his home.

‘Halloa!’ he cried, ‘you have got the Manor House here.’

‘Yes,’ said Erle.

‘And my cousin?’

‘Which enhances its value enormously,’ replied the other, completely unabashed.

‘How did you get it?’

‘Juvenum confidentissime,’ cried Erle, with a

laugh; 'what a catechism you are giving me! Take your cigar, and be thankful.'

'But, seriously, how did you get it?'

'Well,' said Erle, 'if you must know, I earned it. Will that do?'

'Perfectly,' said Charles, with fury and misgiving in his heart. 'Where can I find a light?' But it was not the pipe of peace that he smoked, as he sat gloomily puffing the azure wreaths into the air, and, now that the prize seemed no longer attainable, cursing the nimble hand which had snatched it from him.

Mischance, however, had not yet exhausted her resources; and once again Charles blundered to his doom.

One day at luncheon, when he was out shooting, the conversation had turned on young men's proceedings, and Florence took the line of abusing their sex at the expense of her own.

'The mother of mankind,' suggested Erle, 'is accountable for all subsequent troubles, and her half of creation very properly has the lion's share.'

'Not at all,' said Florence; 'we are angels, but for the infection of your society. When men are eliminated, we shall become angelic again, you'll see.'

‘I shan’t be there to see,’ said Erle; ‘but I suppose I must believe without seeing.’

‘Just look at the difference of boys and girls,’ continued Florence. ‘Only think of boys at school, horrid little inky, mischievous, cruel imps, with not a redeeming point about them; then at college they are ten times worse—do the most atrocious things—spend quantities of money in the most foolish ways, dress themselves like senseless fops as they are, break every rule of propriety and common sense, and at last get sent home to be redeemed and civilised by our society.’

‘Bravo!’ said Erle; ‘I see you know all about it. You must have been at college yourself, Miss Vivien.’

Florence turned round, and saw Margaret blushing scarlet; she caught her eye, and the blush came deeper and deeper. Did Florence know, or was it a random shot? If the first, how insolently rude; if the second, how cruelly well the cap fitted; either alternative, how disagreeable! And so Margaret looked guilty—sat there, less and less able to speak, or to do anything in her discomfort, and Florence knew that she had hit upon a secret.

When she saw Charles afterwards, she touched

upon the point in play. 'Wicked, wicked young man,' she cried; 'how is the process of reformation going on? Nay, do not look innocent, I know all about you. I hope you will improve.'

'About my rustication?' said Charles, plunging at once into the confession which he thought it in vain to refuse—'and, pray, who was good-natured enough to let that pretty secret out?'

'A little bird,' cried Florence. 'No, not a little one; but a bird with golden hair, and solemn eyes, and a tell-tale pair of cheeks that make deceit impossible.'

'Margaret?' asked Charles.

'I shall tell you no more,' said his companion.

'Did you tell Miss Vivien of my rustication?' Charles said to his cousin afterwards.

'No,' said Margaret, looking at him with frank eyes, which, to anybody but a simpleton, would have carried conviction.

'Did nobody tell her at luncheon?'

'No.'

Charles said not another word; he thought another, and it was—'False.'

CHAPTER X.

A MATCH.

Voyez-vous, ma chère, au siècle où nous sommes,
 La plupart des hommes
 Sont très-inconstants ;
 Sur deux amoureux pleins d'un zèle extrême
 La moitié vous aime
 Pour passer le temps.

THE theatricals for which Erle's services had been so dearly purchased, came week by week to occupy a more prominent place among the Christmas festivities of the county. Florence's spirit and ability precluded any likelihood of an indifferent performance. Mrs. Vivien was certain to spare no expense in securing the due splendour of the entertainment. The Major contented himself with stipulating that, if the house was to be turned topsy-turvy, and the long library given over to carpentering and fiddlers, the sacrifice should be at any rate in a worthy cause, and that Shakspeare should receive the chief honours of the occasion.

‘By all means,’ said Florence, ‘provided we have something amusing to follow. Mr. Slap is to contrive an afterpiece for us, and we shall have a capital corps. I have secured Count Malagrida, who, I am certain, must be an admirable tragedian; and Captain Anstruther and Lord Scamperly will do well enough for inferior parts. Now, if kind Fortune would but send us some actresses!’

Florence had her wish: not even the coyness of Heavyshire reserve was proof against so alluring a temptation. Everybody, after a period of well-bred reluctance, ascertained that everybody else was going, and resolved that abstinence would be useless singularity. Even Lady Dangerfield succumbed to her daughters’ solicitations, and felt that to throw away a chance of Lord Scamperly would be almost flying in the face of a providential arrangement. Margaret, when it was proposed to her to take an active part in the proceedings, protested her incompetence too vehemently for disbelief. Nor was Florence at all seriously in need of her assistance; but to her next request she would take no refusal. She had judged rightly, that, could but the proper part for her be found, Nelly’s pretty, frightened air, and half-

coquettish manner, would be certain to captivate the least indulgent audience; and she rejoiced, too, that Nelly should make her first appearance in society under her especial protection. The young lady herself was ardent in her entreaties, coaxed Margaret into abetting her design, and teased the Squire at last into giving a rather doubtful assent. Charles, as a matter of course, was to make himself useful should his services be required.

Thereupon Florence and Erle formed themselves into a committee of management, and—protesting in vain against the Major's restriction—began to ransack their Shakspeares for the discovery of something within the range of ordinary abilities.

‘We two,’ said Florence, ‘shall have to bear the burthen of the day, remember. I presume you know both our characters well enough to choose something appropriate.’

‘Of course,’ said Erle, ‘we must have nothing heroic or sentimental; the histrionic powers of both of us would break down short of that. “Hamlet” is too trite—“Antony and Cleopatra” too affectionate. Suppose we let Malagrida take Richard the Third?’

‘I should have to be the Queen, and I have no

notion of being a scold,' Florence answered, laughing. 'Think, again: what a pretty Miranda our little Underwood prize might be made into.'

'No, no!' cried her companion, '"The Tempest" is a stroke beyond us, there are all sorts of mythological impossibilities at the end; not but that Scamperly might do Caliban to advantage. But stop, I have an idea at last; you shall be Beatrice, the very *rôle* of all others for which Nature intended you.'

'And you Benedick,' cried Florence; 'but it would need cleverer tricks, I assure you, than any in "Much Ado about Nothing" to cheat me out of my quarrelsome mood. However, I shall enjoy putting you down thoroughly in public.'

'I suppose we must have a drawing-room edition of it,' said Erle; 'I will tone it down to the proper key for amateur performers.'

'Very well, Benedick,' cried Florence, 'pray set to work at once. To-morrow, be prepared to find me scorn itself.'

The next morning, accordingly, Erle produced his cast of characters; and his companion confessed to having already spent two hours in realising the tones and gestures of an unassailable Beauty.

Presently the Underwood contingent arrived—Nelly, in a quiver of excitement, and burning to know what conclusion had been arrived at.

‘The play, the performers, and the parts are decided,’ said Florence, gaily; ‘and, little Nelly, Mr. Erle has been choosing an extremely pretty one for you.’

‘I hope it is nothing difficult,’ said Nelly; ‘how do you know that I can act at all?’

‘You will scarcely have to act,’ Florence said kindly. ‘We are going to have some scenes from “Much Ado about Nothing,” and you are to be Hero. You have only to look, just what you are—a dear, good, little innocent—first, prettily reproachful, and next, forgiving and affectionate. You know the story, of course. There is your cousin for Claudio, who is deeply in love; Mr. Erle as Benedick, and I as Beatrice, who are not at all in love; and there is Leonato—a stupid part—which papa is to have; and Don John, the wicked marplot, which we have assigned to Count Malagrida, who *is* very wicked, you know, and will play it to perfection; and then, as he has got such a good voice, we are going to make him sing the song,

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more;
Men were deceivers ever—

a sentiment which will come from him with great propriety.'

A few objections were speedily overruled. Nelly was carried off to undergo a course of theatrical tuition, and to be made more than ever the creature of Florence. Margaret, when her sister told her of the arrangement, thought neither the play nor the characters in perfect taste. The part that each had to personate seemed almost too near reality. It was an objection, however, which it might only do harm to emphasise by dwelling upon. Other people, and those the most immediately concerned, saw no objection; the Squire said not a word, and Margaret buried fears, scruples, and aversions alike, and resolved upon cheerful acquiescence in a scheme which appeared to give her sister such unbounded satisfaction. It was a disappointment, however, that the pleasant dream of home life, which for years past had formed her ideal of happiness—the companionship for which she had waited with such loving eagerness—the keen enjoyment of her sister's society, should, at the very first moments of its realisation, be broken in upon so effectually by invaders so little congenial or sympathetic. Could she expect—was it reasonable to hope that Nelly would

be restored to her as simple, as innocent, as refined, as easy to please, as ready to love, as before her intimacy with her new friend? Who but an enemy could have so inopportunately come between them? Clyffe—so Margaret, with a half-dreary laugh, admitted to herself—had become the very bugbear of her existence; and Florence was in course of promotion from the footing of vague dislike to that of acknowledged hostility and suspicion.

Margaret's alarms would certainly not have diminished could she have known the interior of the enemy's camp, and the real tone of the life to which the two cousins were now to be familiarly introduced. Rehearsals, of course, were to be gone through, and each rehearsal necessitated an increased intimacy, gave Florence a more complete insight into the character of both, and a more thorough hold upon her protégée. Nelly's admiration was the more intense, because she only half understood a great deal of what she heard and saw. The rapid stream of brilliant talk swept noisily past her, impressed her with an increased thankfulness to her protectress and a deeper sense of her complete incapacity to take care of herself. What if Mr. Slap, who had arrived from town,

crisp with good stories, and flashing with repartee, should open his batteries upon her, and send some terrible *bon mot* to explode, shell-like, in her neighbourhood? What if Erle should, in some moment of unusual energy, pass from languid politeness into the satire for which the world in general gave him credit? What if Malagrida, with his black, mysterious eyes, and imperturbable suavity, should some day proceed to amuse himself at her expense, and annihilate her with a polished sneer? Florence, she was comforted to know, would instantly rush to arms in her defence, and would drive off the assailants from a forbidden topic of entertainment with the sharp missiles of her own unflagging wit. How not to love so gracious, so benevolent, so capable a defender? How not to reward her with the confidence of gratitude? What strange prejudice was it that blinded Margaret to the perfections of so good a friend?

Nor was Florence's kindness in the least hypocritical: she was delighted with her latest plaything. Nelly's dependence went to her heart: she loved her, too, for the success which, it soon became evident, her presence assured to the theatricals. Her gracefulness, her becoming timidity,

her transparent innocence, her unconscious refinement, all made her Hero a little triumph.

‘My only anxiety,’ said Florence, with a kind laugh, ‘is, lest you should have left off those pretty blushes before the real performance comes. If you grow too courageous, my dear, I shall frighten you on purpose for the edification of the beholders.’

‘I shall be quite frightened enough,’ Nelly said, taking her patroness’s arm affectionately; ‘I declare I hardly know what I am doing when I begin to speak.’

‘Don’t you?’ cried Florence; ‘well, you are making me and everybody else fall excessively in love with you. I beg you to know that the Count, who is a first-rate judge, considers himself among your most devoted admirers.’

By this time, Nelly’s head, not very strong at the best, was beginning to be in a whirl. King Cophetua, in his royal condescension, could not have surprised the Beggar Maid with a more unexpected homage. Florence made no secret, however, that she thoroughly sympathised with Malagrida’s approval, and encouraged her in the lawful airs and graces of an acknowledged beauty. Nelly on her part, awoke to the delights of

adoration, and thrilled with the consciousness of approaching queenship. Captain Anstruther, Malagrida, her cousin—oh, how bright a place the world seemed! how pleasant society! how alarming, and yet how irresistibly attractive, the courtesies of the lords of creation!

Towards Charles, Florence's charity was far less unalloyed. Despite a pleasant good-nature, his malleability of temper excited her contempt. She smiled as she saw how he took his tone of thought from her chance expressions, and formed his tastes and sentiments upon the model she gave him. Erle liked his old friend, but soon let Florence perceive that he shared her opinion of his character. She, on her part, found him so easy of management, that the task of managing him lost half its attractiveness. 'Le beau plaisir,' she would say, 'de chasser un animal domestique. I declare I could drive him with a bit of red cloth.'

'The fiend,' cried Erle, 'might return—might he not?—

to vasty Tartar back
And swear I never won a soul
So easy as this Englishman's.'

'Fortunately,' said Florence, 'there are no fiends at Clyffe, or we do not know what might happen.' And yet, had she enquired of her con-

science, she might have learnt that it was no heavenly or beneficent counsellor that was driving him from his original scheme of life, and bending his infirm will to a lower, easier, less courage-tasking design.

Presently they joined the rest of the party.

‘Pray,’ asked Erle, ‘has Sir Agricola been brought to terms yet? Am I to have the honour of initiating the Miss Dangerfields into the mysteries of our theatre?’

‘You are,’ said Florence, triumphantly; ‘and a pretty battle I had to fight before Lady Dangerfield’s conscientious difficulties could be disposed of. I was obliged to fire Lord Scamperly at her head, or I should have lost the day.’

Mrs. Vivien owed her ladyship a grudge for a long list of these covert indignities, which feminine antagonists know so well how to inflict.

‘Lady Dangerfield’s difficulties!’ she cried, with a compassionating air. ‘Those poor girls are really most distressingly placed. Between piety and intrigue their mother gives them no peace.’

‘Piety!’ cried the Major, who for once entirely agreed with his wife. ‘Whenever there is a vulgar, worldly old woman, full of all the naughty

things to which her age and sex entitle her, she always tops them up with theology, and becomes entirely unendurable.'

'It is an outrage upon heaven,' said Malagrida, 'for such people to suppose that they could ever get there. Scandal, bigotry, malevolence—what ingredients, even for a Protestant saint!'

'Their devotion,' said Erle, 'is nothing but an unhallowed greediness after the good things of another life. Some people, you know, want to have everything; and a dexterous London mother contrives, of course, to have an invitation to the best and largest party ever given.'

'Lady Dangerfield has made you all quite profane,' said Mrs. Vivien; 'we must forgive her conscience this time at any rate, as Florence has stretched it over the theatricals.'

'Over Lord Scamperly, you mean,' said her daughter.

'But the result is, that we have got our two waiting-women; the Miss Dangerfields will act.'

'And I shall have to teach them,' said Erle, with a sigh. 'Ah, Miss St. Aubyn, if your sister would only help us!'

'One genius in the family is enough,' said Malagrida, hanging over the young lady with a

paternally tender air; 'we are too thankful for Hero to wish for anything more.'

Nelly looked up with a smile of childish delight, and thought how beautiful, mysterious, and terrible a personage her new admirer looked. The Polish music-master's eyes had been strange and sad, Charles's were a lovely blue, but the Count's! they were unfathomable, fiery, searching; and Nelly felt trembling that they looked through and through her.

'The hawk and the dove!' said Erle to Anstruther, as they walked away. It makes me sick to see Malagrida affectionate to that poor little girl. If Fortune honoured me with a young and pretty wife, he is one of the last people whose acquaintance I should choose to cultivate.'

'Hawks and doves!' cried Anstruther, whose tender heart was already in a glow of enthusiasm; 'angels and devils, you mean. Come now, Erle, confess—you do enjoy teaching her her part, don't you?'

'She is not so stupid as the Miss Dangerfields, I admit,' Erle said, complacently; 'but it is a great deal of trouble.'

'Trouble!' cried the other, indignantly, 'and stupid indeed! but you are really ice.'

‘Yes,’ said Erle, ‘the very clearest, coldest, hardest Wenham Lake. Don’t you envy my frigidity?’

‘It is inhuman,’ said the other; ‘but I do not believe a word of it; but it is the other sister you admire, I know.’

‘The other is the beauty, of course,’ said Erle; ‘and has the most wit.’

‘Well!’ cried his companion, as if the force of astonishment could carry him no further. ‘Talk about infatuation!’

‘On the contrary,’ said Erle, composedly, ‘the calm verdict of an uninterested spectator.’

‘My dear fellow,’ cried the soldier, ‘you are an old fool.’

‘And you,’ rejoined Erle, ‘a young one.’

There the conversation stopped; but Anstruther resolved that his friend’s blindness admitted of only one explanation—he had fallen in love.

Before long a new excitement diverted half the attention hitherto concentrated on the theatricals. Erle had brought some horses in his train, and amongst others, the much-maligned Runnymede, by this time a favourite hunter. One afternoon, as they were riding home, discussing the fortunes of the day and the achievements of various mem-

bers of the Heavyshire Hunt, Charles, who had had the luck to be prominent throughout the run, began to grow vehement in championship of the chestnut, whose failure earlier in the season had procured him the honour of Florence's acquaintance. Erle was pleased to be sarcastic, and to deride the other's eulogium.

'Why, Evelyn,' he cried, 'confess now, did not you wait for me to knock the top off that post and rails, and make you a hole in the bullfinch, just before we killed? Even an old screw, you see, like this, may put some people to the blush.'

Runnymede was jogging along almost exhausted with the morning's exploits. All day he had been unusually vicious and troublesome, and the signs of the conflict were discernible on his tawny sides. The bullfinch had embraced him lovingly in his passage through it, and he had contrived to give his master and himself a roll into a wide and miry ditch. Altogether, he looked extremely unprepossessing, and Charles's spirits rose at the comparison.

'Upon my word,' he said, 'such an old, wicked, battered piece of obstinacy——'

'There are different objects for horses, you know,' Erle said. 'I keep mine all for going. If

I wanted a pretty hack to canter after young ladies and pick up dismounted Amazons, I should make a bid for the chestnut.'

'Come, Erle,' said the other, in a passion, 'I tell you what; we will ride them both over a couple of miles of fair country, and see which is the better horse of the two. Runnymede indeed!'

'Agreed!' said Erle. 'I shall put him into training forthwith, and you will see us do wonders. Do you know he once ran for the Derby? in honour of which I shall back him for twenty pounds.'

'I only hope he will be in one of his pretty tempers,' said Charles, 'and give you another such "brook scene" as we had this morning.'

The Squire protested against so unworthy an employment of a good hunter, but convinced at last by Charles's predictions of victory, warmed heartily into the idea; and Margaret, soon becoming an enthusiastic partisan, made daring wagers with all her friends on the chestnut's success.

'You would like to ride him yourself, would you not, Margaret?' said the Squire, as they halted their ponies, and watched Charles giving his horse

a morning gallop round the confines of the park, as he came across the valley and swept at last over the flight of hurdles to where they were standing.

‘I shall be broken-hearted if Charles does not win,’ she said; ‘but of course he will. Mr. Erle’s horse, grandfather, is a perfect fright.’

Margaret’s zeal touched her cousin, and was the signal for a tacit reconciliation. He had left Nelly the day before at Clyffe, and in her absence the two relapsed, almost unconsciously, into their former communicativeness, intimacy, and affection. Charles forgot the interval of estrangement,—the suspicions which, though not quite harboured, had not been quite expelled,—the doubts which he had left unanswered, the moods in which Margaret’s very excellences were a source of irritation. His old fondness came upon him with the pathos of remembered neglect. Margaret’s high spirits were something pleasanter than the hard, bright merriment of the Vivien party. His grandfather seemed so much more thorough a gentleman than the Major. The illusion of novelty, the piquancy of contrast, had died away, and even Clyffe, he found, could be sometimes monotonous and unattractive. Florence, the last time he had been there, had

shocked him by some piece of cynicism a shade coarser than usual. Nelly was deep in a rather foolish flirtation with a train of admirers. The clever people were occasionally snappish, morose, or too indolent to be agreeable. Erle had more than once turned the laugh against him, and the Clyffe laughs were by no means charitable. Mr. Slap, when quite at ease, fell below the Slap-ian standard, and was simply dull. The absence of sentiment made everything depend on fun, and when the fun collapsed, the house was dreariness itself. On the whole, though the tinsel was well laid on, Charles's instinct began to teach him that it was not gold. One or two pleasant evenings at Underwood completed his conversion. What was it, he began to wonder, that, when all things favoured his proposal, had forced him to hesitate? Why was it that the boon for which he had longed so eagerly was still unasked? Nelly had charmed him, but the fascination died away as he left her presence. Margaret's features haunted him in his dreams. With the one he grew fond, but never intimate; the other seemed to read his thoughts. Nelly amused his fancy, her sister mastered his heart.

Margaret was woman enough to feel a little

triumph at his return. Florence had done her worst, she felt assured, and done it in vain. The Clyffe armoury had been exhausted against him, and still her cousin was the same. How the world brightened around her at the thought!

‘You will be spoilt for a quiet life, I am afraid,’ the Squire said, as, the night before the race, Charles was recounting the splendour of the Clyffe preparations. ‘What can we think of to amuse you? You will find us sadly dull.’

‘Never!’ said Charles, vehemently, and looking at his cousin. ‘Do I look tired of my home? I never felt less like it, I assure you. You should have seen how indignant the Dangerfields were with me for coming!’

‘Well,’ said the Squire, as he settled himself at a distant table with a book, ‘take care, I advise you: private theatricals are dangerous things.’

Charles lowered his voice for his cousin’s ear alone.

‘My dangers,’ he said, ‘lie nearer home.’

A simple phrase enough, but speaker and hearer alike knew its meaning. Margaret felt a load suddenly lifted from her heart. Coldness and uncertainty on his part, secret grief and disquietude on hers, were now about to end. Not till the

relief was promised did she know how keen the pain, how heavy the burthen which, unavowed even to herself, she had been of late enduring. What a treasure of devotion, stored up in innocent fidelity, a single word or look may awaken into consciousness and life !

The Squire read on, Margaret began to play, and Charles, pleased to have said so much, and yet half frightened at his own temerity, sat dreamingly beating time to the music, and pondering over his latest move. He had said but a few words, and those conveniently indistinct. The compliment, such as it was, would have applied to the one sister as well as the other ; yet conscience told him that enough had been done. He felt that Margaret, if uninformed before, now knew his heart, and that, should his present mood prove transient, he was still pledged to it ; if ever the chain which his own hand had just fitted to his neck should come to gall him, he had no more the right to throw it off. The very suspicion of such a possibility was alarming ; and Charles, like a coward as he was, felt even now the hesitation which is the first step to repentance.

The next morning the three drove together to the meadows where the race was to take place.

‘Upon my word,’ said the Squire, as Charles made his appearance, glittering in pink and white, ‘you look quite the reverse of respectable. Pray wrap yourself up in your great coat, and let no one see what freaks I am abetting; and I really think there has been a frost—the poor chestnut’s legs!’

‘The poor riders’ necks!’ cried Charles with a laugh; ‘but no, grandfather, the ground will be beautiful by twelve o’clock.’

And so it proved. Before noon there was a goodly crowd collected at the scene of action. The day was bright, soft, and cloudless. Anstruther and the Count had been busy all the morning in deciding upon the course, and were still marching about the fields, followed by a train of men with flags and hatchets. A ditch had been dammed up into a very respectable brook, quite enough, as Erle’s friends cheerfully observed, to insure anyone who chose a thorough ducking. The Clyffe party naturally assembled in force; most of the neighbouring houses contributed spectators; the gallant H. H. was duly represented. A dozen carriages were drawn up on a knoll favourable for commanding a view of the race. The two principal performers, carefully

enveloped from chilly air, were being paraded about by their grooms. Runnymede, evidently conscious that something unusual was expected of him, was already doing his best to disturb the harmony of the day, and filled his supporters with the blackest misgivings. Warned by his reverted eye and ready heels, the inquisitive crowd followed him at a respectful distance, and exchanged in safety such unflattering pleasantries as his past exploits and personal appearance suggested. On the whole, though Erle's prowess was acknowledged, the popular opinion was that he must come to grief, and would certainly win no laurels from the present encounter.

Presently Florence with the Major and Nelly rode up. Nelly carried off her grandfather to see the course, and Florence, weary with her ride, accepted the vacant seat beside Margaret. Erle was not long in making his appearance.

‘I am afraid, Miss St. Aubyn,’ he said, ‘that I have no good wishes from you; of course the Underwood interest carries all before it; but let me show you where we are to go. You see the tent there on the hill; well, that is the starting-place; we come down the valley, across that fence where the flag is, and then in the next field is the

brook where my enemies predict my fall. By sitting here, you see, you will have an excellent view of my discomfiture, and your cousin will probably gallop past you without the trouble of my company.'

'That will be very uninteresting,' said Margaret. 'I beg you will show fight all through, and only be beaten in the last field.'

'I shall do my best to obey you, you may be sure,' said Erle; 'and now we must all have some gambling. I will be courageous, Miss St. Aubyn, and bet you anything you like to nothing in support of my much-decried steed: I see you are despising him already, like the rest of the world.'

Erle stood by her side of the carriage, and seemed almost to forget the presence of her companion. Florence had never felt his partiality with such unpleasing distinctness. It was bad enough to be neglected, but to be neglected openly was more than she could bear.'

'Stop, Mr. Erle,' she cried, 'and arrange my bets for me.' But Runnymede was already stripped, and no more time was to be lost. Even as she spoke, her old admirer had turned and gone without a word. Next, Charles rode up, in full-

blown colours, followed by a little crowd of admirers. Florence felt impatiently that it was not for her sake that he came.

‘Your blessing on your knight,’ he cried, moving towards his cousin’s side.

‘And my knight’s horse,’ said Margaret, stretching from the carriage to pat the chestnut’s glittering neck. ‘Ride, Charley, for the glory of Underwood. I have staked a fortune on your victory.’

‘Never fear!’ cried her cousin; and then he stooped down and whispered something in her ear, which Florence would have given worlds to catch, but which she was evidently not intended to overhear. Her rival, she felt, was having all the honours of the day to herself. She smiled—but a dark cloud lowered on her brow, and darker thoughts still tossed and swelled angrily in her troubled mind.

A few moments more, and a shout from the crowd, and a sudden dispersion of the group that had gathered at the starting-place, showed that the race had begun. Both followed it without difficulty; and Florence, absorbed, forgot for a moment her rankling animosity in the excitement of an evenly-balanced contest.

Neck to neck the two horses came sweeping along the valley's side ; almost abreast they flew across the second fence ; stride by stride they crossed the wide meadow and neared the critical obstacle of the race. At this point the posture of affairs began to change. Erle, with a view to bettering his chance of getting quietly across, took care to be ten yards behind as they approached the brook. That over or into this his horse should go, he had quite made up his mind, and Runnymede apparently had become aware of the necessity, for he had put down his head, was shaking it impatiently at Erle's firm holding, and was going as though life and death depended upon his being across the water as soon as his rival. Now the chestnut, though a pretty hunter, was young, inexperienced, and apprehensive ; and though he performed gallantly in the hunting-field, amid a crowd of horses, and with the crash of hounds, his courage misgave him as he found himself spinning along without assignable motive—the foremost, if not alone—at the cold, bright, clearly-marked piece of water, which the Clyffe hedgers and ditchers had been so busy for days past in helping to its present growth. Each stride, as he approached it, gave

evidence of faltering nerves and increased indecision. Charles, his blood now at boiling heat with the prospect of victory, and in no hesitating mood, plied his spurs vehemently, held his horse's head relentlessly straight, and before the chestnut's mind was half made up, he found himself already half-way across. His last spring, however, had a dash of reluctance in it, and served but to land half his body on the opposite bank. 'An awful sound of water in his ears,' a sudden descent into the mud, a frantic struggle, a lurch to one side, and—crash came Runnymede from behind, with all the accumulated impetus of half a mile's racing gallop: over rolled the chestnut, down went Charles: Runnymede in an instant was standing on his nose with the tail to the sky; Erle was spinning into a chaos in which conflicting legs, heads, saddles, were confusedly jumbled in disagreeable proximity to his own skull. Florence sprang to her feet the better to observe the catastrophe: and Margaret, sitting speechless and rigid, and clutching unconsciously at her companion's hand, for an instant drew her attention to herself. Florence read in her scared looks the agony of a sudden terror.

‘No one is killed,’ she said, with a touch of scorn: and turning her glass once more toward the central figures of the scene.

But Margaret had no eyes or thoughts for any but a single point of the proceedings. She could distinctly follow each new phase. Erle was the first upon his legs, and hurried to his fallen comrade’s assistance. Runnymede, with perverse incongruity, had set himself composedly to graze, and was watching with stormy, vigilant eye, the crowd of small boys who rashly tried to catch him. The chestnut was slowly collecting his scattered faculties, and wondering what in the world had befallen him. Meantime a little cluster had gathered round Charles, who lay flat out on his back, picturesque, mud-bespattered, and inanimate.

Margaret sat in silent horror. What did not depend for her on the revelations of the next few minutes! How tragical a catastrophe had perhaps already befallen her! Charles killed! Her heart died down within her at the possibility. What would the world be without him! Her anxiety was shortlived, for her cousin presently sat up, and in a quarter of an hour was perfectly restored. For the sake of the spectators, and to

prove that no harm was done, they resolved to continue the race. Margaret bit her lip, and strove in vain to conceal her distress at the resolution. Presently both horses were for half a field out of sight.

‘Why,’ said Florence, turning round for the first time; ‘how white you look! Ah! here is Mr. Erle again.’

But Margaret’s nerve was gone; each new jump, waited for before with pleasurable excitement, cost her an agony of expectation. She clenched her hand, resolved at any price on self-command; but it was almost too much to bear. Once and again, with no ostensible reason, she hid her face in her hands, and burst into half hysterical tears.

‘Ah,’ cried Florence, sitting down in the carriage with an air of triumph, as a shout from the crowd proclaimed the conclusion of the race; ‘Runnymede is the conqueror, and I have won—let me see—but, my dear Miss St. Aubyn, you must be surely ill.’

‘Not at all,’ said her companion, the tears again rushing to her eyes; ‘but it gave me a fright—it is ridiculous, I know. I shall be better presently.’

‘Well,’ said Florence, this time with undisguised

contemptuousness in her tone; 'pray do not cry, at any rate, there are no bones broken. I cannot fancy being so frightened at a fall.'

Margaret was hardly mistress of herself, nor in a mood to weigh her words.

'Cannot you?' she said. 'Then you never had any one you loved in danger.'

'No,' rejoined the other; 'not any one I *loved*; I sympathise with you, I am sure.' There was that in the emphasis of the sentence that recalled Margaret to herself at once; she looked sharply up, for the tone of Florence told her that war was meant. The insinuation scarcely admitted of a reply: nor, if it had, did Margaret feel capable of attempting it. Florence had meant the suggestion as a simple rudeness. Fortune had turned it into something more. She saw by the other's expression of mute perplexity and endurance that she was helpless, and that her random shot had pierced her antagonist's armour at a vulnerable point. 'So,' she said to herself afterwards, as she rode silently home, 'so she really loves him.'

CHAPTER XI.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

—— Who is so gross
That cannot see this palpable device?

THAT night there was to be a rehearsal at Clyffe: Margaret drove back alone with her grandfather, and Charles's visits to his home for the next few days were too hurried and business-like for confidential intercourse. His hesitating will welcomed any decent pretext for delay, and it seemed only reasonable, now the Vivien's party would so soon break up, to delay the great step of his life to a time of quiet, leisure, and thoughtfulness. Perhaps the consciousness of his own treacherous vacillation—the possibility, dimly foreseen, and only for an instant entertained, of a breach of faith, the uneasy foreboding of a struggle between honour and inclination—reconciled him to such brief and scanty communications as the circumstances rendered excusable, but which would have

seemed mere tantalising drops to the thirsty lips of a hearty lover. Perhaps, too, Margaret's embarrassment betrayed itself in an unaccustomed reserve. Florence had almost openly taxed her with being in love with her cousin, and she had begun to know for the first time that she really was. The knowledge, while Charles's wishes remained in ambiguity, was extremely distressing. How far, she asked herself, had her manner betrayed her thoughts? How most effectually, for the future, could she conceal what was destined perhaps to be for ever a secret? Had she read her cousin's looks, words, tones aright? or was the happiness she already felt her own, a foolish dream? Suppose—suppose—but her whole nature shrank back at the imagined catastrophe. To the last we are incredulous of misfortune. Upon the whole, however, Margaret confessed to herself that she was miserable.

Loud were the outcries at Clyffe, vehement the indignation, when Erle, only three days before the final performance, suddenly declared that he must go to town. Florence had for days past watched his flagging zeal, and denounced his departure as a mere idle manœuvre. Was it that the Miss Dangerfields were slow to learn and

prompt to forget, and insisted, despite all instruction, on a rendering of their parts altogether peculiar to themselves? Was it that Slap had exhausted all his stock of stories, and gave himself airs about his afterpiece? Was it a growing dislike of Florence and her relatives that suggested ever, with increasing cogency, the delights of an interval of independence?

‘Business,’ said Erle, shutting up his letter at breakfast, and looking as serious as possible—‘business of the most imperative kind. A single afternoon will do. I will be back to-morrow.’

‘It is too unkind,’ said Florence, despairing. ‘Nobody but you, Mr. Erle, could have hit upon such a provoking expedient. Come back early, pray: I shall want you for a hundred things.’

‘Can you get up by eleven?’ said the Major. ‘If so, you can be at Sandyford by two, and we will send to meet you.’

Erle, however, preferred to trouble no one. ‘I shall leave my horse at the station,’ he said, ‘and ride back again to-morrow. You may expect me by three; and I expect you all to be diligent in my absence. When the Underwood people come, pray put them through their parts. Evelyn is certain to break down.’

‘How vain he is!’ cried Florence, still in a pet. ‘Indeed, Mr. Erle, we shall do extremely well without you.’

The performers promised to make the best of their time, and Erle rode away in secret triumph.

Now the road to the station ran across Underwood Common, and by the gates of the Manor: and Erle, as he passed, looking up the avenue, caught sight of the house and a sunny garden path, and the Squire and Margaret marching up and down in confidential talk, and was seized with a sudden fancy to bring his London expedition there and then to an immediate close. Mr. Evelyn and he were the best of friends, Margaret looked extremely picturesque, and the excuse of bringing tidings from Clyffe would satisfactorily explain an unexpected call. He half checked his horse; but prudence and propriety for once carried the day. No other train would take him in reasonable time to town; he was already full late; he dare not reappear at Clyffe with his journey unfulfilled, and so acknowledge its needlessness. Forbidden fruits, however, are sweet, and the consciousness that one may not taste sometimes is the first incentive to desire. Erle, though he had never thought of it before, now resented the

circumstances and the people that forbade the indulgence of a whim. Clyffe, as he thought it over, seemed more wearisome than ever; Florence was really insufferable; the acting, after weeks of trouble, atrocious even for amateurs; Slap's prologue, a mere piece of buffoonery: in a few days half a county would be witnessing his disgrace as a manager. In what weak moment had he been tricked into so much unprofitable toil? How provoking that it should now defraud him of what would have been a real enjoyment!

The next day, as he passed on his journey back to Clyffe, fortune spared him the necessity of choice; for the Squire and Margaret were half way down the avenue on their way to the village, and escape, even had he wished it, was out of the question. Never, however, was a more willing prisoner caught. Erle soon let his horse be sent to the stables, came in to luncheon, and, with a half malevolent satisfaction at the inconvenience his delay would occasion, calmly banished the theatricals from his thoughts. Charles and Nelly, so Margaret told him, had just started; she and her grandfather were to follow the next evening. The Squire was inclined to be talkative, and Erle set assiduously

about making himself agreeable. Margaret, watching her grandfather's mood, welcomed the arrival of an opportune companion; conversation flowed pleasantly on; Erle launched heroically into old-fashioned politics, quoted Mr. Pitt's speeches and Lady Mary Wortley Montague's letters, and listened with resigned good-nature while the Squire described some famous debates in which he had participated when he sat for the county. At last they agreed to go out to the woods, where cutting was in progress.

'I am very sorry that anyone should see how ruthless you can be,' said Margaret. 'Mr. Erle, my grandfather, you must know, has a mania for destructiveness, and cuts down all my favourite trees.'

'Nonsense, Margaret,' said her grandfather. 'Was it not Selwyn, Mr. Erle, who called trees mere excrescences, that grow out of the earth to pay people's debts with?'

'A most lovely pine,' cried Margaret, undisturbed; 'the chief feature in the view, and the greatest possible protection in windy weather.'

'We must have air,' said the Squire, who had been reading the Report of the Ladies' Sanitary Committee, and lived in chronic terror of suffocation.

‘I appeal to Mr. Erle’s taste,’ said Margaret; and so all three went out to the doomed tree.

Erle thought gleefully of the rehearsal that was going on without him, and congratulated himself on his escape. Dim visions of the Miss Dangerfields flitted before his mind’s eye. The society in which he found himself was a new sensation. He saw plainly that it never entered Margaret’s head to care in the least about him, and he liked her for it. She wanted her grandfather to be amused, and so she liked Erle to stay, just as she would have ordered Punch round to the windows if that had been the Squire’s fancy. Erle contrasted her with the tribe of self-seeking, ambitious pleasure-hunters to whom he was going—Florence’s intrigue, the Major’s epicurean indifference, Mrs. Vivien’s laborious worldliness, Scamperly leering like a little Satyr, Malagrida’s smooth manners and black heart—and rode away at last, in a serious, regretful mood, as if quitting Paradise and bound for Pandemonium.

He was received at Clyffe with a volley of interrogations. Florence upbraided him with his faithlessness. ‘Of course,’ some one suggested, ‘he was too late for the morning train.’ ‘Or,’

said another, 'is there the usual break-down at the Sandyford Junction?'

Erle said, negligently, 'No'—that he had been kept——

'I dare say,' put in Florence, turning with a laugh to Nelly; 'he called at Underwood to pay his respects to you, and found you fled.'

'Excellent excuse,' cried Erle; 'I wish I had thought of it.'

'No?' said Nelly. 'Were you there, Mr. Erle?'

'You hear what Miss Vivien says,' answered the other. 'She is never wrong, you know.'

There was not the least suggestion of truthfulness in his manner, and no one thought of it again till the evening. The weather was cold, and the long corridor unwarmed. Florence wanted to go and see if some carpentering in the theatre was being properly done.

'Pray, wrap yourselves up,' Mrs. Vivien said, with a shudder; 'the corridor is full of draughts.'

'We shall not care,' said Nelly, much too excited to think about cold or heat.

'Let me,' said Malagrida to Nelly, 'wrap you up in this cloak. One always catches cold when one is tired, and you have been so hard at work.'

'No,' said Nelly, with a pretty petulance,

‘take it to Miss Dangerfield: she has been of the greatest use to us all day.’

‘We must take care of the Beautiful,’ said the Count, gallantly, ‘and the Useful will take care of itself. The remark is Göthe’s, but I am quite of the same opinion.’

Erle went and brought her a Scotch plaid.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘I am going to insist on your wearing this. You forget that you are the heroine of to-morrow night, and meanwhile extremely valuable. Besides, do you know, I was especially charged this morning to take care of you.’

‘Were you?’ said Nelly, surprised. ‘Who charged you?’

‘Yes,’ said Florence, turning from where she stood in front, and fixing her eyes on Charles, to see that the answer made a due impression.

‘Miss St. Aubyn,’ said Erle. ‘You will submit to me now, I hope.’

‘Then you were at Underwood?’

‘Of course,’ said Erle, with a laugh. ‘I have been telling you so all day.’

Florence watched the paleness that crept over Charles’s cheek, and felt triumphantly that defeat was not even now absolutely impossible.

Mr. Evelyn and Margaret did not arrive till

late next day. The house was crowded with guests, and from top to bottom was in a whirl of excitement. Florence seemed the animating spirit of the whole, but overwrought, confident, and unfeminine—more than ever, Margaret resolved to herself, a distasteful companion. The conversation seemed harsh, noisy, and out of tune with the quiet courtesy to which her grandfather's house accustomed her. Mr. Slap was assigned to her at dinner, and found her, she was conscious, extremely unentertaining. She tried in vain to feel interested in the London gossip, beyond which it compromised his dignity to stir. It was a relief when the moment for departure arrived. Later on in the evening some of the gentlemen established themselves at whist, and Florence became the centre of a party of listeners gathered about the pianoforte.

‘You know,’ she said to one of the new comers, ‘we are not to be exclusively classical to-morrow. Having done justice to Shakspeare in the early part of the entertainment, we devote the rest of the evening to something original. Everybody admits that in “Old Lovers and New” Mr. Slap has quite outdone himself. I have a nice part, middle-aged, respectable, but sentimental; Count

Malagrida is to look as nearly virtuous as he conveniently can; and we are to be a steady-going old couple, holding our own, in the way of romance, against the young people. It was so kind of you not to object to being respectable, Count Malagrida.'

'If you consent to be middle-aged,' said the Count, 'why should I? For such old people, I must say Mr. Slap has given us a great deal of flirtation.'

'Yes,' said Florence; 'I am to bring him flowers on his birthday, and we are both to behave as absurdly as if we were little cooing turtle-doves of eighteen and twenty-two, instead of—'

'Spare us the contrast,' said the Count, deprecatingly. 'My song about the flowers is, I assure you, quite pathetic.'

'Let us rehearse it at once,' said Florence, sitting down at the piano; and so the Count, who had a beautiful, tremulous, feeling voice, began to sing:—

AIR—Cinquante Ans.

A bouquet for my birthday? No—
Birthdays, alas! by each I'm told
How years steal on—how fast I grow
Much more than half a century old.

What wrinkles come, what whitening hairs!
What aches! how vainly does one strive
To banish by one's youthful airs
The thought that one is fifty-five!

Our pleasures fail—our bones grow brittle:
Each passing season adds a fetter—
But hark, a knock!—'Tis Doctor Little
To see if my lumbago's better.
The doctor! once I should have said
There's Lilian, maddest girl alive,
With some sweet nonsense in her head—
But now, you see, I'm fifty-five.

A knock—a guest I can't deny—
I'm with you, sir, in half a minute;
Light, Air, and pleasant World, good-bye!
Good-bye, the joys I've tasted in it!
'Tis Death, who standing at the gate,
Provoked to find me still survive,
Declares that he'll no longer wait
For an old boy of fifty-five!

But no—dear, constant friend—'tis you;
Still mine, as when we roamed together,
And vowed, yet children, to be true
In altered times and stormy weather.
Still travel with me to the last,
Still smile though Fortune's worst arrive,
And, for the sake of all the past,
Still love me—though I'm fifty-five.

The Count's soft tenor died pathetically away,
and a buzz of admiration broke out as the closing
notes expired in a shake.

'Excellent!' said Florence, triumphantly.

‘Count Malagrida, you are a treasure; and though “you’re fifty-five,” are worth all the young men put together, I assure you.’

‘You are very encouraging,’ said the Count, gratefully: ‘not that I suppose any of one’s friends will really stick by one as long as that; but a life is such an atrocious piece of business, that one must needs idealise it a little.’

‘Yes,’ said Erle, who had by no means recovered his good spirits, and was quite prepared to grumble at anything; ‘why does one endure it at all?’

‘Why?’ cried Malagrida, ‘cowardice, idleness, and superstition—the three keys to all terrestrial enigmas.’

‘No,’ said Slap: ‘a sense of justice. Suicide is a mean advantage upon one’s neighbours, just like slipping away from a dull party on a false excuse. It is only by everybody staying and making the best of it that one gets through it at all.’

‘Who was it,’ asked Florence, ‘that compared life to a house on fire with a sentinel posted at the door? One would escape if one dared, but one cannot face the sentinel, and dares not jump out of the window.’

‘And yet,’ said Erle, ‘escape is an easy affair after all. There was some strong-minded young lady, you may remember, who said she was at a loss to conceive why moralists laid so much stress on teaching people how to die, for that all her friends seem to succeed admirably well the first time they tried.’

‘What is that about a house on fire?’ asked Anstruther of Florence. ‘Why, Miss Vivien, was I not reading to you only yesterday that life is a progress—the march of a great general—here a battle, there a disaster, but still on.’

‘A professional simile,’ cried Malagrida, ‘hot from the Horse Guards. Progress, indeed! call it a march home from Moscow — one long disaster.’

‘Progress!’ said Slap, with the greatest disdain; ‘and Fate, I suppose like an un pitying policeman, continually telling the human species to move on—’

‘And play its barrel-organ in the next street,’ suggested Florence, laughing. ‘Well, when one thinks of it, what a big place the world is!’

‘Yes,’ said Erle; ‘and if we are to be profound, what a number of people in it—ever so many millions, you know, dying and being born

every minute! Each generation but a ripple on the ocean.'

'Nonsense,' cried Florence. 'I never believe anything that disturbs my complacency with my species and myself. Man is the centre of the universe.'

'And Miss Vivien the centre of humanity,' said Malagrida.

'What do you think of us?' Erle asked, dropping out of the conversation, and speaking for Margaret's ear alone. 'It is a cheerful philosophy, is it not?'

'It is an ice-palace,' said Margaret—'glittering, but cold to live in.'

'And in reality only mud and water,' answered her companion. 'Discontent raised to the dignity of a science; but that way of talking is infectious.'

'Pray do not infect me,' cried Margaret. 'I prefer to think life interesting.'

'In fact,' said Erle, 'you believe in "the best of all possible worlds."'

'I believe,' answered the other, 'in its being a better world than one fancies when one is vexed or tired.'

Charles, with furtive glance and lowering brow,

watched the dialogue without catching its import, and threw the reins on the neck of a suspicious mood. Erle was summoned to the whist-table, and Florence, interested in the conversation, and in far too high spirits for weariness, kept the group of talkers in full activity. To Margaret it seemed as though the party would never break up. Minute by minute she began to shrink more from her companions. The utter uncongeniality of the ruling spirits of the house affected her with a strange and miserable sense of isolation. The words fell from their lips hard, merciless, bright, and cold: and they struck a chill to her heart. Even her kinsfolk seemed under the spell, and half alienated. Nelly sat wrapped in a childish wonderment. Charles caught the fashionable tone of the moment, and contributed his icicle to the general glitter. He was no longer the simple, frank, tender friend with whom she had been so confidential but a week before. Was it that the fascination was strong, she asked herself, or was his nature so strangely unresisting that a few days' fresh companionship should be able thus to work a change? Was this the character to which, more than to any other in the world, she would fain have looked for strength, guidance, and reliability?

Was this the man whom Florence knew she loved?

With doubts like these gathering over her mind, the banter of some, the gossip of others, the cynicism of all became almost unendurable. Her very brain seemed racked with weariness. The longing for escape into solitude grew strong upon her. Self-restraint became increasingly difficult: to join naturally in the conversation less and less possible. Still it went on, and at last she could bear it no longer. One or two of the party had already departed, and watching a favourable moment when the general attention was fixed on Malagrida, she whispered to Florence that she should slip away.

‘Pray do not,’ said the other: ‘it will be the signal for a general desertion.’

Margaret pleaded a headache, and passed from the room unobserved. Florence, in another instant, was once more deep in the controversy.

Delighted to have escaped, with a joyful sense of relief thrilling through her, Margaret hurried across the hall, and was turning already toward the staircase, when the flood of clear, still light that streamed through the glass doors, and lit up half the wall, caused her to linger for an instant

to admire the silent splendour of the glistening scene outside. The moon was at the full, and the sky—but for here and there a block of slowly-travelling cloud—intensely bright. Wind there was none, and the almost motionless air had just a tinge of frostiness that whitened all the landscape, and intensified the lustre overhead. Down in the valley, and like a little lake, a film of vapour marked the river's course. Far across, in some remote farm-house, a sleepless dog was baying at the moon. Each sound fell sharp and distinct upon the ear. Margaret stood entranced with pleasure. It seemed to her that she had never known the full loveliness of night till now. What more efficacious remedy for such perturbed spirits as hers than Nature here proffered to her thirsty lips? Strength, confidence, and equanimity once again took possession of her mind. As she stood and gazed, the drawing-room door opened, and a gush of noisy conversation fell rudely upon her ear. Florence's laugh, high, scornful, pitiless; Mr. Slap exploding into a noisy joke; Major Vivien's half-jovial tones—each she fancied distinguishable—all equally unattractive. Compared with these how perfectly exquisite the peace, the silence, the tranquillity of the scene

outside. But next came approaching steps and merry wishings of good-night in the doorway.

‘Pray,’ some one was saying, ‘are you one of the victims to-morrow?’

‘Do you mean as listener or a performer?’ Florence asked from inside the room.

‘Quevedo,’ said Slap, ‘said that the punishment of fiddlers in hell was to sit and listen while the other fiddlers played. I confess if one must make a choice, I would rather fiddle than hear.’

Margaret knew that the speakers were approaching her, and in an other instant escape would be impossible. She felt as if she dare not confront them. Already the staircase was cut off, for she must cross their path to gain it. Flight was, however, still within her reach. She snatched a shawl from the table, tried the handle of the door, found that it was still unfastened, and in another instant was in the open air, beyond the pillars of the porch, and in safety.

The night was exhilarating, the consciousness of having eluded the enemy stirred the spirit of adventure, and Margaret’s spirit rose within her. She drew a long draught of the clear, frosty air, and it seemed like inspiring nectar. The terrace, completely sheltered, and safe from all invasion,

seemed tempting for a moonlight walk. Several guests had yet to go, whose carriages would not be ordered till the whist was over. She ran no risk of being shut out. The delicious chill brought her hot brow an almost instant relief. Return would be safer ten minutes hence than now. Margaret resolved to go. She wandered on, and soon reached the terrace end. A broad flight of steps led downward to the gardens, wrapped in a mysterious haze. Beyond stretched the firwoods pitch black, except where silvered by the rime. A towering mass of ivied wall threw a deep shadow upon her path. A cloud crept slowly across the moon, and blotted out half the landscape's glory. The river poured on, and raged about the lasher and beneath the garden bridge with a sullen moan. Margaret felt a melancholy gather at her soul: her courage died down as an inward voice—the sudden birth, perhaps, of overwrought frame or troubled nerves—whispered of impending catastrophe, and filled her with a causeless awe. She turned to go, but was conscious, as she turned, that she was no longer alone. Some one was approaching from the house. A dark form and the tiny spark of a cigar were alone discernible in the deceptive glimmer. The new comer, whoever it

was, unconscious of Margaret's neighbourhood, strode carelessly half-way down the walk, turned abruptly off at a side gate, and was lost to view. Margaret, in a flutter of spirits that seemed to her strangely childish, and sad at heart—she knew not why—regained the house.

Meanwhile, Florence, still loath to depart, stood behind her father and watched the play.

‘But where is Mr. Erle?’ she cried. ‘I thought you carried him off to play.’

‘So we did,’ said Scamperly, ‘but he was too sleepy for anything, and I believe pretty nearly ruined Sir Agricola; at his last revoke we sent him away to enjoy himself philosophically with a pipe in the garden.’

‘You have all a good right to be tired,’ cried the Major. ‘If Erle had known his trade as manager he would have sent you all upstairs two hours before this.’

Thereupon the ladies departed: and Nelly, escorted by Florence to her bedroom, was astonished to find that her sister had not yet appeared. While they were still wondering, Margaret hurried in breathless from the keen air out of doors.

‘I have been upon the terrace,’ she said; ‘look, Nelly, what a lovely night it is.’

Nelly and Florence both looked, and they were yet standing at the window, when they heard a garden-gate slam, a footstep on the crisp gravel, that came nearer and nearer out of the gloom. At last a form emerged into the light. Florence laid her finger on her lips, and whispered—‘Mr. Erle!’

And so it was.

The next morning Erle and Evelyn were standing before the breakfast-room fire.

‘I hope,’ Florence said, as she came in, ‘that you enjoyed your moonlight walk last night.’

‘Beyond everything,’ said Erle, calmly. ‘The night was perfect.’

‘But,’ said Florence, ‘you must have wanted a companion.’

‘I had one,’ said the other; ‘the best in the world—a cigar.’

‘Oh!’ said Florence, mysteriously, ‘a cigar!’ And afterwards Charles asked her what she meant; nor had he to press long for an explanation.

‘Is not that very romantic?’ she asked, as her story came to its close.

‘Very romantic indeed,’ replied Charles. And the tone of his laugh—sad, angry, revengeful—assured her that at last her work was done. The

victory so long watched and struggled for was hers.

Erle's inopportune departure had inflicted no real injury upon the play. Actors and actresses alike were perfect with their parts. Everything had been beautifully arranged. Lord Scamperly, as Dogberry, discovered a vein of low comic talent which took his best friends by surprise. Slap made a most sententious Verges, and Anstruther's disguise as the Friar was so complete, that it was not till he took his wig and beard off that Nelly was convinced of his identity. The library was turned into a green-room ; and a party of fiddlers, stowed away in an alcove, whiled away the half-hour during which a crowded audience was duly marshalled into place. At last every seat was full ; a knock was heard from behind the scenes, the band stopped in mid career, the curtain rose, and Beatrice—glowing, beautiful, and untamed, her hair swept proudly back, and her tall neck rising majestically out of a monster ruff, her mother's diamonds glittering in dazzling profusion about her, and rouge and powder adding lustre to the whole—rustled in a fine brocade across the stage.

There was a murmur of admiration, a hush of

suspense, and even the severest critics admitted that her appearance, though unclassical, was effective. Already she had had a little triumph among her fellow-performers. 'I stoop to conquer,' she had said, giving a tip of her finger to Charles, whose looks assured her that her mirror had told her nothing but the truth.

'Not to conquer *me*, thank goodness,' Erle thought to himself, as turning away he looked through the curtain's peep-hole and watched Margaret and the Squire taking their place among the spectators. Meantime Florence, conscious of loveliness, and assured of her own triumph, was really good-natured about her companions' success, and cheered Nelly, already faltering and apprehensive, with kind looks and speeches.

'Frightened?' she said. 'You dear little pet, there will be plenty of Claudios, I can tell you, before the evening is over; it makes me cry to see you act; think of me and be brave.'

The first dialogue convinced everybody that two performers at least had chosen their parts sagaciously.

'What, my dear Lady Disdain,' cried Benedick, 'are you still living?'

'Is it possible,' Beatrice answers, 'that Disdain

should die while she hath such meet food to feed on as Signor Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert into disdain if you come into her presence.'

Florence tossed her head, gave her fan the most contemptuous flutter, and the audience burst out laughing at her companion's discomfiture. Erle, however, who had arrayed himself with foppish splendour in satin and velvet, and wore his sword with perfect grace, was not in the least disposed to be abashed.

'Then,' he answered gaily, 'is Courtesy a turn-coat. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted, and I would I could find it in my head I have not a hard heart, for truly I love none.'

'A dear happiness to women,' rejoined the lady; 'they would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood I am of your humour for that. I had rather hear my dog bark than hear a man swear he loves me.'

'God keep your ladyship in that mind!' said Erle, 'so some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face.'

Here came another burst of applause, and pre-

sently Margaret started as her cousin appeared and acquitted himself feelingly of Claudio's amorous confession—

O my lord,
When you went onward on this ended action,
I looked upon her with a soldier's eye,
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand
Than to drive liking to the name of love.
But now I am returned, and that war thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires
All prompting me how fair young Hero is.

Fair indeed! When the third act arrived, and Nelly, in the simplest white and with no ornament but the colour that now died her cheeks, now left them ashy white, got tremulously through her pretty lines, the enthusiasm of the audience reached its highest point.

Sir Agricola grinned across the room at Lady Dangerfield, as, hardly conscious of its appropriateness, Hero described her friend —

O God of love! I know he doth deserve
As much as may be yielded to a man;
But nature never framed a woman's heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprizing what they look on, and her wit
Values itself so highly, that to her
All matters else seem weak. She cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,
She is so self-endear'd.

‘*La plus belle des parures,*’ says the French proverb, ‘*c’est l’espoir d’être aimée.*’ Was it this that made Nelly’s eye sparkle and her cheek glow with a prettier flush than usual, and that tinged her manner with the most becoming excitement? Malagrida, at any rate, let a burst of admiration break from his lips, and being professedly a patron of youth, beauty, and innocence, declared himself completely overcome.

Pocket-handkerchiefs were in sudden request, and the Squire felt his breath coming short and hard, when the marriage scene brought affairs to a crisis, and Nelly, with her hair dishevelled, and her bridal wreath torn off, lay—fair, innocent and lifeless—across the stage. It was now that Anstruther, in a brown frieze coat, sandals, and a pilgrim’s crook, at once relieved his feelings as a man, and established his reputation as an actor. ‘I have marked,’ he cried—

A thousand blushing apparitions start
Into her face : a thousand innocent shames
In angel whiteness bear away those blushes ;
And in her eye there hath appear’d a fire
To burn the error that these princes hold
Against her maiden truth.

‘And all,’ whispered Mrs. Vivien, ‘because the

poor child's maid carried on a flirtation from her window.'

'The moral of it,' said Sir Agricola, 'should be "No followers allowed," a doctrine I insist upon with all my people.'

'At any rate,' suggested his neighbour, 'not above the area railings.' And then the curtain fell.

The scenes were being altered for the after-piece. The actors had gone away to relapse into conventional attire; and Nelly, first down of any one, found herself for a minute in the library alone. She was yet thinking over her part, when Charles came in with a courageous, half-embarrassed air, took her hand with a respectful tenderness, yet as its rightful owner, whispered something into her ear which made her eye glisten and an exclamation of surprise start to her lips and was prepared, apparently, to refute all expostulation with the oldest, pleasantest, and least answerable argument which logicians have hitherto introduced to the notice of mankind.

'I must quote Beatrice's last speech to you,' he said; '"Peace, I will stop your mouth with a——"'

At this moment the door opened: Florence

and Malagrida bustled in, engrossed in the final arrangements for the farce. Florence perceived in an instant what was happening, and pretending, with great presence of mind, to have seen nothing, made an excuse to withdraw her companion from the door.

Malagrida looked blankly at her for an explanation. ‘Dear me,’ he cried, ‘what in the world is the matter?’

‘Nothing,’ Florence answered; ‘only a new scene extemporised in “Much ado about Nothing.”’

CHAPTER XII.

NELLY IS CONFIDENTIAL.

The door was shut—I looked between
 Its iron bars, and saw it lie,
 My garden, mine, beneath the sky,
 Pied with all flowers bedewed and green.

From bough to bough the song-birds crossed,
 From flower to flower the moths and bees,
 With all its nests and stately trees—
 It had been mine—and it was lost.

THERE are people who maintain that the drive home from a party is not the worst thing about it. If the entertainment has been a bad one, there is the agreeable sensation of relief, and of a duty done; if things have gone well, our spirits are pleasantly wrought up; even timid natures have caught a dash of courage: persons to whom a few hours ago it was an effort to talk have been confronted, and are formidable no longer; there is the dull soothing rumble of the wheels, good enough excuse for silence, and so provocative of

conversation; there is the certainty, so welcome to bodily fatigue, of an interval of rest, darkness, and comfort before a new exertion. Those to whom society is an ordeal look back upon finished tortures; those to whom it is a triumph, upon achieved success: wits chuckle over their jokes, flatterers call to mind their compliments, and young ladies, it may be believed, re-enact their flirtations. Nelly, at any rate, had her thoughts full of hers.

Charles was still a guest at Clyffe, and her serenity was somewhat disturbed by the reflection that upon her must devolve the momentous task of acquainting Margaret and her grandfather with the great event of the evening. Cowardice naturally suggested that such revelations must be made to a single listener, and that consequently nothing could be done till they were safe at home. Presently, however, the Squire, suddenly lapsing from the briskness of the first two miles, grew suspiciously taciturn, and before long, the sounds which emerged from his corner of the carriage made it abundantly manifest that, as far as he was concerned, the sisters might enjoy a *tête-à-tête*.

‘Well, little Hero,’ Margaret said kindly,

‘have you had as pleasant an evening as you hoped?’

‘Pleasanter, a hundred times!’ said the other, becoming extremely frightened, and feeling that her only chance was to make her confession forthwith. ‘Dear Meg, what do you think has happened?’

‘Perhaps,’ said her sister, with a laugh, ‘the beautiful Brigand has made you a proposal.’

‘No,’ said Nelly, taking her sister’s hand confidently; ‘but some one else has. You must guess again. But I cannot wait to tell you; it was Charles.’

‘Charles!’ cried Margaret, snatching away her hand before she knew what she did, and shrinking back in the depths of the carriage.

‘You are surprised,’ said the other; ‘well, do you know, so was I; it startled me so at first. One is always wrong about these things, but I used to fancy that he was in love with you. Florence always told me that it was not so. But tell me, dear, what do you think?’

‘Florence told you?’ said her sister, as a flood of suspicion against her old antagonist swept irresistibly across her mind, and added a new element to the horror of disappointment, sur-

prise, and humiliation that already reigned there.

‘She told me that we were both in love,’ said Nelly, simply, ‘almost the first time she saw us.’

‘But *are* you in love?’ asked the other, crushing down the cruel impatience of the enquiry into a tone of forced composure.

For an instant her fate seemed even now in suspense; even now the doom, though half pronounced, might somehow be averted. Nelly hesitated in reply

‘Am I in love?’ she said, with a little childish laugh; ‘well, Margaret, I can hardly tell. You know we always liked him, did we not?’

‘Liked him!’ cried her sister; ‘and you can hardly tell! why, Nelly, does your heart tell you nothing more than that?’

‘Yes,’ said Nelly, thoughtfully, as if feeling her own moral pulse, and counting the beats. ‘I suppose I am in love; don’t you think I am?’

Margaret held back the vehement ‘No,’ that was rushing to her lips, and her companion prattled cheerfully on.

‘If I am not I mean to be so very soon,’ she said; ‘he is much handsomer than Captain

Anstruther, at any rate; and he is very much in love with me, which is the chief point, is it not?’

‘Yes,’ answered Margaret, tortured almost beyond endurance, and feeling that it needed but a few more such sentences for the pent-up storm of misery to burst in a torrent of tears; ‘if he is thoroughly in love, it will all be well.’

‘He *is* thoroughly in love,’ Nelly said, as if resenting the possible disparagement of her conquest. ‘And you are pleased, dear Meg, I hope, are you not?’

Margaret leant forward and pressed a pair of bloodless lips to her sister’s cheek. ‘My darling little Nell,’ was all that she could trust herself to say; and even then, before the first violent heart-beating of a sudden shock was over, the scheme of self-sacrifice was framed, the burthen which dignity alike and unselfishness imposed, resolutely taken up, and Nelly’s happiness substituted, with a pious heroism, for her own.

‘How cold you are!’ Nelly said, putting her sister’s shawl about her; and then both by common consent relapsed into silence.

Fortunately there were six miles yet to drive, and Nelly, having disburthened herself of her secret, happy with her own thoughts and all the

new world that had suddenly opened upon her, was quite prepared not to be loquacious. Life, always smiling enough, seemed suddenly transformed for her into a more than Paradise; imagination crowded her path with half-described enjoyments; and a flood of happiness bore her unresistingly along, she knew and she cared not whither. The evening had been full of excitement, flattery, triumph. The applause of the theatre was still ringing in her ears: the Count's authoritative 'bravissima,' Anstruther's complimentary protestations, Florence's encouragements; at last, Charles's tender words. The party had ended with a dance, and a roomful of admirers had been intriguing for the honour of her hand. A party of Guardsmen—tall, terrifying, ambrosial—had come across from the Duke of Pondercast's, and petitioned with the most abject entreaty for a valse apiece. Slap for an instant forgot to be sarcastic, and assured her she was a second Peg Woffington. The Major, defiant of impending rheumatism, insisted upon escorting her to her carriage, and wrapped her cloak about her with an air of quite paternal affection. These were but the froth and sugar-plums upon the trifle of existence, and at the bottom was something solid,

tangible, and sweeter than all—a husband. What could people mean who said that happiness was not for man, and earth seldom the residence of any but a transient bliss?

And yet close beside her sat Margaret, with death at her heart, gradually taking in the full tragical force of the news just imparted to her. In the silence and darkness she confronted her misfortune, and hopelessly acknowledged that it was overwhelming. She seemed to herself numbed and paralysed by the blow; courage, resolution, even piety, died down within her. Grief, she began to feel, may be strained till it borders on ferocity. For the first time in her life her love to Nelly wavered, dwindled, flickered, as if for sudden extinction. It was impossible to forgive even the unconscious instrument of such a disaster; and—suggested vindictiveness—was it unconscious? Had not some little miserable coquetry, some wretched school-girl ambition, some foolish caprice of sentiment, some lesson too well learnt from her cruel instructress, led her by a pleasant path to the ruin of her sister's happiness? She was the disciple, might not she also be the colleague of Florence; and was not Florence, Margaret bitterly asked herself, a foe? It was

for this, then, that she had, ever since she could remember, given the patient thought, the watchful devotion, the passionate attachment, which from the cradle upwards Nelly had had concentrated upon herself; for this that she pressed for her return, waited for it, oh how eagerly! taken the new comer to her heart of hearts, believed and made others believe her to be perfection; and this was the end—to see her, in a negligent, half-playful mood, scarce certain of her own inclination, content, but not more than content, with her good fortune, come and lay her hand smilingly, as sole proprietress, upon what was for Margaret the one treasure of the world, the single possibility of happiness, the only escape from despair; this, then, was the end, the crowning result. It was all over; all the high hopes, the vague longing, the nervous dread of calamity, the uneasy consciousness of a neighbouring enemy. It was all over; and Margaret had lost.

They got home too soon for all. The Squire woke up with a start in the middle of his nap, as the carriage stopped at the Park gates; Nelly was recalled to earth from an agreeable course of airy castle-building; Margaret, her thoughts still in utter confusion, had to rouse herself for

the first painful apprenticeship in the difficult art of concealment—for the laborious assumption of a composure which was no longer her own.

‘Why, Margaret,’ cried her grandfather, in dismay, as they came into the hall, and the light revealed the paleness of her cheek, ‘how tired you look, my child! And there is Nelly, who has been acting and dancing, and doing enough to exhaust you both, and now she looks as fresh as a lark. To bed with you both, and let me hear nothing of either of you, pray, for twelve hours at least. Why, you are as white as a sheet!’

Margaret, kissing her grandfather, said, Yes, that she was tired, and forthwith disappeared. Nelly lingered behind, followed the Squire into the drawing-room, and with a great deal of unnecessary trepidation, informed him of her cousin’s proposal.

Mr. Evelyn was fairly astonished, and showed an unexpected reluctance to acquiesce in the scheme.

‘Married!’ he cried; ‘why, my dear child, I was resolving only to-day, to send you back to school for another year at least. You are for ever breaking down in your duets, you know; and only the last time you wrote to me you

spelt "your affectionate grandchild" with a single *f*.'

'And I *am* your affectionate grandchild,' said Nelly, putting her arms round his neck with a caressing air, whose efficacy in obtaining her petition she had often ere now ascertained.

'You are a little goose,' cried the Squire, conscious that a superior tactician was leading him from the real point of attack; 'and marriages between first cousins are the worst things imaginable.'

Even as he spoke his conscience rebuked him for the insincerity of the objection; there were some first cousins, it suggested, whose alliance would have raised no such scruples in his mind.

'Not the very worst,' replied Nelly, sagaciously; 'for instance, one of the girls from St. Germain ran away with M. Troistemps, our dancing-master, and was never heard of for a fortnight—only think!'

Her grandfather had a lurking distrust of all French institutions, and mentally acknowledged that an early marriage was not without its advantages. A Frenchman and a dancing-master! Good heavens! what perils to throw wantonly in an innocent young creature's path!

‘I am sure,’ he said, ‘you have much too high principle for anything of the sort?’

‘I am very steady indeed,’ cried his companion, trying to look demure; ‘that is why I want to be married.’

‘But,’ persisted her grandfather, ‘are you sure you know your own minds?’

‘I am sure that I know mine,’ said the young lady, by this time convinced of the necessity of a decided tone—‘quite sure; I love him with all my heart.’

‘I see no help for it then,’ said the Squire, half abstractedly.

‘Help for it!’ cried the other indignantly; ‘one would think that it was something wicked that we wanted to do.’

Her grandfather in his heart suspected that on one side at least it was; but he made no reply.

‘Good night, little wife,’ he said; ‘and pray, whoever you marry, keep a little affection for your old grandfather.’

‘To be sure,’ cried Nelly, fondly, ‘with as many *f*’s in it as you please.’ And then she left him to his meditations.

These were by no means of the pleasantest

description. An elderly man hates having his plans upset; a tender-hearted man shrinks from the idea of pain. Both of these annoyances seemed to be coming upon him. For years past he had watched the close friendship between Margaret and her cousin; and, bitterly disappointed himself, he reckoned that she could scarcely be less so. For years he had been arranging for his grandchildren, and never once had such a conjuncture as the present suggested itself to his thoughts as a possibility. In a hundred pleasant schemes Charles and Margaret formed the central group, and a new and unexpected disposition of events gave him a shock.

The more he thought of it, the more disturbed the Squire grew. He rang the bell for some cold water, poked and repoked the fire with unconscious vehemence, and walked about the drawing-room in a fever. He liked Margaret by far the better of the two, and the other plan would have secured having her always about him. Nelly was a decided trouble in her home, a pretty trouble, but still burthensome; pleasant for a variety, but intolerable in any permanent arrangement. She was excitable, moody, un-

certain in spirits. Her sister's equable good temper spread an atmosphere of serenity around her: the Squire felt that half the cheerfulness of life would be wanting in her absence. Then what would become of the village? Nelly displayed the most complete inaptitude for poor people's concerns. Even Margaret could not help laughing at her egregiously bad attempts at keeping order in the Sunday-school, when from time to time, with tears in her eyes, and a little troop of rebels behind, she appealed to have her tottering authority enforced, or some incorrigible offender summarily disposed of. Her sister, on the other hand, reigned, a gentle despot, in half the cottages in Sandyford; and every new joy, or sorrow, or anxiety soon found its way to her for sympathy, counsel, or encouragement. Her departure would, the Squire admitted, be hardly less than a catastrophe. Then as a companion there was a delicate tact about her that the other wanted; it might be childishness, but children can be refined, and Nelly was, her grandfather knew, fashioned of a coarser clay; the touch of something spiritual, that raised Margaret above the earth, and invested the common details of her life with a

half-angelic purity and loftiness—the magnanimity, the courage, the cheerfulness that made intercourse with her delightful, were altogether wanting to her sister. Nelly's prettiness was captivating; her very want of soul had a sort of charm; her baby petulance amused. It was pleasant to have her, like a little half-tamed animal, running wild about the house; but as Charles's wife—as the proprietress of Underwood—as Mrs. Evelyn's successor—as his own necessary companion—and instead of Margaret! The Squire drank off two large tumblers of water, paced himself into a fever of excitement, and went to bed at last in a passion.

‘The boy is a fool,’ he said to himself, as he lit a candle for his departure—‘a fool; and I only hope he has not been a knave into the bargain.’

Had he been knave as well? Two people besides the Squire were at the very moment searching their own hearts for a reply to the same question, and pleading eagerly this way or that before the secret tribunal where conscience arraigns the undetected crime. Had he been base? Charles was fighting his scruples, qualifying unwelcome recollections, ignoring (as it is so

easy to do when one is judge and prisoner at once) the damning facts of the case; building up his suspicions and complaints into a compact edifice of grievance. Again and again he pronounced himself innocent; yet the acquittal gave him less satisfaction than he hoped. He proved to himself conclusively that Margaret was in the wrong—that it was she who had been guilty of desertion—that, if eyes and ears were to be believed, she had a secret understanding with Erle—that she had shown herself capable of contrivance, intrigue, perhaps even untruth—and having proved it, he knew at once that not one word of it did he really believe.

The verdict was too monstrously absurd even for the readiest faith, and the consciousness of its absurdity, banish it as he would from his thoughts, forced itself disagreeably upon him; and yet it was upon this alone that he could take his stand, and make an attempt at self-defence. What other apology—his heart smote him as he asked himself—what other apology could the most charitable ingenuity devise? He must—he would—he did believe it; and yet with how uneasy and flagging a belief! He was free to choose, and who should blame him for not choosing a woman

who evidently had a more than liking for another? He pictured Nelly to himself, smiling, playful, lovely—and tried to make her brightness blot out all the rest of the picture. He tried in vain; another figure stood there, reproachful, suffering, indignant with the lawful scorn and displeasure of a slighted love; Nelly's merry laugh rang in his ears—yet as he listened he seemed to catch the sound of something like a groan.

Margaret meanwhile stood before the idol where she had worshipped so long in secret; she was to do so no longer, yet she strove to believe it not a false one. She traced back the thread of their friendship through years of growing intimacy; at each new stage she found that love had been deeper, stronger, more distinct; she watched it growing through the gradations of unconscious liking, acknowledged congeniality, the tenderness of confidence, at last an absorbing passion. She recalled each variable ebb of hope or sickening fear—the words, looks, tones, upon which for weeks past her very existence had seemed to hang, and which seemed to assure her of her cousin's heart. Could she have been mistaken? Was it the rash interpretation of a too

confident eagerness? Was it the credulity of eyes blind to everything but what they long to see? Could Charles's act be interpreted in any sense but one? Could she have been rash, foolish, infatuated? What should be the verdict on him? A crowd of recollections—treasured only too sacredly, forbade an instant's hesitation—flocking to the bar of Conscience, each with its particular chain of reasoning, all coincided in a single mournful cry of—Guilty! Guilty!

But the guilt was not his alone; an instinct, undefined but perfectly clear, pointed to Florence, and said that the work was hers. Margaret was unable to detect the working of the scheme, but she felt no doubt as to the final result. Here and there she caught a clue; for a few instants the enemy was apparent—then all was obscurity again. Charles's variable moods—his unexplained change from tenderness to resentment—the sudden decisiveness, so foreign to his halting temperament, and the strange rapidity of his last resolution—all was mysterious; but every mystery has a key, and casting about for the key which should unlock her own, Margaret decided unhesitatingly that Florence's was the hand that held it. There was something of comfort in the

thought; it was better to think of Charles as a victim than as wholly mean, fickle, or ungenerous.

For the present her course was clear, and Margaret steeled herself for the task. No human eye—least of all her cousin's or her sister's—must read the secret of her disappointment. If Charles was consciously a wrong-doer, no reproach, except from his own heart, should ever reach him, nor indeed would be needful. As for Nelly, Margaret had been all her life planning for her, watching her happiness, protecting her from the possibility of trouble; and the concealment which circumstances now entailed seemed only the natural crowning act of self-sacrifice. She, at any rate—so Margaret's calmer and more generous thoughts assured her—was free from all blame, and had the right to the fullest possible enjoyment of her position. To secure her this was now to be her sister's care—a weary, difficult task, that cowardice would have despaired of, and all but the highest sort of magnanimity declined; Margaret, however, accepted it without a doubt.

The announcement, it may be imagined, caused a commotion at Clyffe. Before long Florence came with her mother to offer congratulations.

There was a light in her eye of triumph, merri-
ment, half-insolent exultation, which Margaret
was at no loss to interpret, and which confirmed
her suspicions. She shrank before it as from a
cruel stab—silent, patient, self-controlled, but in
an agony. Florence, incapable of profound or
tender emotion, and not in the least in love
herself, saw nothing but the natural annoyance
at a somewhat humiliating reverse; nor when she
thought of Erle, and the indignity of her own
desertion, was she at all disposed to be con-
siderate. Why, indeed, she asked herself, should
Nelly have been disappointed any more than her
sister? Yet there was something in Margaret's
looks that touched her with remorse in spite of
herself. She had plotted for this, and now that
the plot had answered she began to think that she
had been unscrupulous. Conquerors, it is said,
regard their battle-fields with anything but
satisfaction—

Such things, you know, must be
After a famous victory.

And yet the sight of one's achievement, and the
price it cost, has something awkward in it.
Florence silenced her repentant mood by de-
termining at any rate to be very kind to Nelly.

‘I expect to be asked to the wedding,’ she said caressingly, ‘as a reward for my good prophecy. You did not know how to fall in love, dear, did you, till I told you how to set about it?’

‘Indeed,’ Nelly said, tossing her head very becomingly; ‘I knew very well. It is too bad for everybody to think me a baby.’

Malagrida overheard, and burst out laughing—

‘I do not think you the least like a baby,’ he cried. ‘In return, please to let me come with Miss Vivien to the ceremony. Marriages, provided they be other people’s, are always so interesting.’

‘Miss St. Aubyn means to let us all come,’ cried Anstruther, who had been feeling extremely sentimental ever since Charles’s good fortune became known, and made no secret of his broken-hearted condition.

‘All except Mr. Erle,’ said Florence, ‘unless he is brighter than to-day. Come, Mr. Erle, have you no pretty speeches for the interesting *débutante* who did your instructions so much credit?’

Erle was in the chilliest, politest, and most transparently sarcastic mood.

‘A pretty speech?’ he cried—and Nelly fancied that she could see the sneer playing about his

lips—‘of course I have. Do you think me a monster of ingratitude, when Miss St. Aubyn has established my reputation as a manager? Lady Dangerfield has already asked me to contrive a play for her, and, I suppose, to find her two fresh Claudios for the young ladies.’

‘He is insufferable!’ exclaimed Florence. ‘Come, Nelly, into the next room, and leave him to mock by himself.’

‘Miss St. Aubyn knows me too well,’ Erle said, as they turned to go, ‘to suspect me of any thing of the kind. Charles, my dear fellow, kneel down and receive my benediction. Youth, innocence, constancy——’

‘Don’t be a fool, Erle,’ said Charles, blushing red in spite of himself, for the other’s manner was undeniably contemptuous.

‘Not be a fool?’ asked Erle, looking straight at him, with the most provoking smile. ‘And is that really your advice? Well, I will try to obey you. And when, oh most fortunate of youths, are you to be——?’

‘Executed?’ put in Malagrida—‘so young a victim, so guileless, so inexperienced—upon my soul, it is pitiable!’

Charles thought that every one was being

extremely rude. Malagrida's pleasantries were disgusting. Married men, the Count gave him to understand, were the natural enemies of the species, and lawful prey. He talked about Nelly as though she were a choice sweetmeat for which his mouth was watering, which Charles was just about to devour. He laughed at the pretty child-like simplicity of an early match—so safe, so proper, so interesting.

'*Morbleu!*' he cried, patting Charles on the back—

Morbleu! qui n'aurait de l'humeur,
En pensant que madame
De monsieur fera le bonheur,
Bien qu'elle soit sa femme?
Jours de paix, et nuits d'amour,
Le diable y perdra son tour!

'I would back the devil's chance,' muttered Anstruther, 'if Malagrida had a hand in the matter.'

Meanwhile Charles resented the familiarity of the Italian's tone, and the implied scoff at what dignity, no less than virtue, bade him regard as above everything sacred. Nor did his intercourse with Margaret tend in any degree to console him for the discomfort which he elsewhere experienced. He hoped to reassure himself with her

that all was right, and to have his conscience set at ease. He found himself beset with graver misgivings than ever. If she was hurt, she gave no sign of pain; but she discouraged his attempts to be confidential. Something in her look and manner cut short his sentiment; affectionate speeches, long meditated, carefully introduced, died away on his lips. Was it his guilty fancy, the knowledge that he was despicable, or some subtle sympathy of insight that showed him a shade of contempt in Margaret's calm, studiously kind manner? Did he imagine it, or was it that she had thoroughly faced her position, confessed her disappointment, acknowledged the levity of his character, and with a resolute will already half dethroned him from her heart? Indecision is the offence in the code of sentiment which a woman finds it hardest to understand, and can least of all forgive.

Erle's were the only eyes for which Margaret's carefully-worn disguise was unavailing; nor would even his keen-sightedness have sufficed, but that Charles's manner supplied the missing links, and enabled him to conjecture with safety where Margaret's conduct baffled his observation. He used his knowledge with delicacy, tenderness,

respect. The result was that Margaret, she little guessed why, found his society less distasteful than any of his companions. He set himself to please her as he had never yet tried—he watched her taste—he studied the effect of every word uttered in her presence—he interested himself in learning her moods. A practised tact warned him against attempting just now the slightest advance towards intimacy. Margaret would have said that they knew as little as ever of one another, and cared still less. Erle, on the contrary, was trying every step of ground, convinced himself of the refinement, strength, nobility of her character, and began, though without the least definite idea of future measures, to thank the good fortune, caprice, or contrivance, which had saved so many excellent gifts from being wasted in the unworthy keeping of a thankless recipient. He did not, however, choose any longer to appear in her society as a disciple of Malagrida's scepticism: the world, he began to feel, 'was not so bitter, but a smile can make it sweet.' Bad men, who have nothing to hope, are natural proclaimers of the guilt and the hopelessness of existence. The sneers which amused Florence seemed almost profanity, judged by the standard

to which he knew Margaret would apply them. He mentally pronounced Slap ill bred, for transporting the Clyffe atmosphere into a half-saintly presence. He bore with the most stoical indifference the raillery with which all tried to stir him into a more entertaining mood. Even Scamperly's impertinence was tried in vain. Erle appeared simply a shade wearier than usual.

‘Hang him!’ his lordship said, still smarting with the merited castigation of some rash attempt, ‘he has taken to preaching, and is ten times worse company than ever.’

‘My young friend,’ cried Malagrida, ‘the moral tone of society must be kept up. What, if it comes to that, is the use of such a personage as yourself to mankind?’

‘What does the footman in “Figaro” say?’ cried Slap. ‘Vous vous êtes donné la peine de naître. Many thanks to you, I am sure, on behalf of the species; but as to moral tone, why, Scampy, I don’t suppose you know a right thing from a wrong one when you see it—do you think he does, Miss Vivien?’

‘I know that everything you do is wrong, and that everything that Miss Vivien does is right.’

said Scamperly. 'So, Mr. Slap, that is "one" for you; and now perhaps you will leave me and my morals alone.'

'Le droit d'être Scamperly, dont les Scamperly jouissent,' cried Erle. 'Do not invade his traditional privilege of unsaintliness.'

'Pray, no more quarrelling,' cried Florence, who thought that the men were getting dangerously cross. 'Here, fortunately, is the Squire, so we must all behave properly.'

The weeks passed away; familiarity had robbed Nelly's situation of its principal terrors, and, as every new phase in turn succeeded, she poured her confidences with increasing outspokenness into her sister's ear. On one of these occasions half the mask from behind which the enemy's batteries had played upon her was suddenly swept away. Nelly had been especially affectionate, and had warmed into a somewhat tenderer train of sentiment than usual. Presently she grew embarrassed and nervous, and evidently had something on her mind.

'You will be always the same to me, dear Meg?'

'I hope so,' said Margaret, at a loss to know what was coming.

‘And you must forgive him, and be as we all were in old times.’

‘Forgive him?’ cried Margaret, startled, and turning red. ‘For what?’

‘That is what he would like to know,’ said Nelly, embarrassed. ‘You are vexed at something, are you not? For weeks past you have been so cold to him.’

‘Cold?’ said Margaret, scarcely knowing what she said. ‘It must have been his own thoughts, I am sure.’

‘No, no,’ said Nelly, apologising for her betrothed; ‘other people noticed it. ‘What do you think Florence Vivien said to him when she saw you and Mr. Erle together? these were the words: “On revient toujours.” You see what she meant.’

‘What did she mean?’ cried Margaret, springing up, for a moment off her guard, as the truth flashed upon her. ‘Mischief to me they meant, I know—but how?’

‘She meant, dear,’ said Nelly, innocently, ‘that you were so dazzled with Mr. Erle, that you had forgotten old friends, and did not care much about Charley. But, dear Margaret——’

Nelly stopped short, her courage fairly failing

at the very point of the enquiry she longed to make.

‘You do like him, don’t you? Florence Vivien says that Mr. Erle has never been in love till now, and that we shall have both weddings together.’

‘My dear little Nell,’ said Margaret, fairly vexed out of her usual passivity of manner, ‘you, and Charley, and Miss Vivien, and every one else, are altogether dreaming. Mr. Erle is less than nothing to me, and I to him. What can have put such a wild notion into your head?’

‘Florence put it,’ replied Nelly, with simplicity; ‘and I confess I thought she was right.’

‘You never made a greater mistake in your life,’ said her sister.

‘But then,’ said Nelly, anxious to make the best of her cause, ‘you should not have told Florence about the rustication. It was hardly kind, to a person who laughs at everything. Charles was sadly vexed.’

‘I never told her,’ said Margaret.

‘No?’ asked Nelly, surprised. ‘Then there must have been some mistake.’

‘Indeed there must,’ said Margaret, firmly ‘a mistake or——’

‘Or what?’ asked her companion.

‘We will hope it was a mistake,’ said Margaret.

Then the conversation dropped, and the subject vanished from Nelly’s thoughts. Margaret knew that she had come upon another of her enemy’s snares.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR BETTER FOR WORSE.

Déjà le sort a soufflé dans les voiles,
Déjà l'espoir prépare ses agrès,
Et nous promet, à l'éclat des étoiles,
Une mer calme et des vents doux et frais :
Fuyez, fuyez, oiseaux d'un noir présage,
Cette nacelle appartient aux amours :
Nous qui voyons commencer le voyage,
Par nos chansons égayons en le cours.

MARRIAGE—that pretty invention, as the French epigram has it, for interesting us in the future as in the present—was not likely to leave a young lady like Nelly with much leisure on her hands. With hopes, pleasures, anxieties, she was perfectly absorbed. The neighbourhood was excited at the prospect of a wedding, and Nelly found herself the centre of a flattering inquisitiveness. People treated her with a newly-found respect which was delicious. There was something in the

servants' demeanour which assured her of increased importance. A great many of her acquaintance would, she knew, have been delighted to occupy her place. The Miss Dangerfields wished her joy with an emphasis ostentatiously unselfish; but they would, either of them, she knew, have taken Charles if they had the chance, and been thankful. Their mamma muttered some gloomy criticisms on the inexpediency of cousins marrying, that were, in reality, only the measure of her vindictiveness at so provoking a disappointment. Everybody conspired to do homage to the coming queen; and Nelly, though she did her best to be modest, struggled in vain against a natural elation. The prospects of orders to give, servants and tradesmen to rule, parties over which to preside, the splendour and dignity of married life; bonnets as many and as fine as she pleased; gloves and lace handkerchiefs beyond the narrow limits of a schoolgirl's allowance; carriages and horses, and footmen, and a house, and finally, a husband of her own—always handsome, good natured, and politely tender—what prospect could be more enchanting? Ten times a day she flung herself into Margaret's arms, and declared, in an ecstasy of

satisfaction that her happiness was almost too much to bear.

Margaret, after making all allowance for the impetuosity of a first attachment, decided that her sister had not the least notion what she was about, and would have been far more profitably employed with her lesson books and exercises, which had now been discarded for a more exciting phase of life. Nelly showered kisses upon her in unmeaning profusion; some of them, Margaret felt, were really meant for Charles; some for the house, the servants, the bonnets, the gloves; some as a mere outflow for high spirits; only the tiniest residuum for the person upon whose cheek they were impressed.

Such felicity was not, however, to flow on unbroken to its close. A dark day was in store for the lovers; and the Squire, somewhat fatigued by several weeks of sentiment, showed himself ruthlessly decided in refusing its postponement. Charles, it was decided, should go back to Oxford for his degree, and was meanwhile to set diligently to work to provide against a repetition of his recent disaster. A tutor was found, the books packed up, the last adieu exchanged; and Nelly retired to her bedroom, sat at the window,

wildly waving her pocket handkerchief till the carriage was out of sight, and proceeded, despite the consolation of her maid, to cry herself almost into hysterics. An hour later she was too miserable to appear in public for lunch; but she devoured the contents of a well-supplied tray with apparent satisfaction; and as she sent down for a second help of roast mutton, the Squire was no doubt right in relieving himself of all anxiety as to the physical results of her distress, and in agreeing with Mrs. Crewe's panegyrist, that 'mental emotions increase the appetite,' and that 'sorrow is beyond all question the best specific for digestion.'

While the tiny current of domestic interest was thus flowing gently on at Underwood, the great ocean of politics was raging tempestuously at Westminster. During the recess there had been symptoms of a coming storm. Mr. Slap had been sent for by telegraph to town, and it was known that matters were not at all as they should be at the Pumps and Fountains. Public opinion, it was felt, was gathering strongly against the Metropolitan Waterworks. There was a horrible caricature in 'Punch,' in which Slap figured with a champagne bottle under his arm, astride of a

large fire-engine, and darting unwelcome cascades in all sorts of inappropriate directions. Some marble ducks that he destined for the banks of the Serpentine, were damned by the general taste almost before they had left the artist's studio. He had hoped to gratify the mob by a fountain in the Strand, and two nymphs with vases were already in preparation. A noble lord called a meeting at Exeter Hall, and denounced the scheme as pagan and indelicate. Some anonymous satirist inveighed against Slap's joviality, idleness, and indifference to everything but good dinners and fine ladies. 'Ah,' wrote the poet,

— 'If to dine all night and joke all day
Would mend my pumps, or make my fountains play.'

At last, one fatal day, the fountains did *not* play, and everybody felt that Slap was doomed. Trafalgar-square stood silent and melancholy; the Cupid by Park-lane refused to squirt; the operations of the Benevolent Cup-of-cold-water Association were brought to a sudden stand-still; the streets were a Sahara of dustiness; nobody for six hours could wash or drink. London, in a rage of dirt and thirst, sent up a hoarse roar of indignation, and clapped its hands,

by this time extremely black, in demand of a victim. The Premier saw that if the ship was to weather the storm, it could only be by throwing somebody overboard, and gave Slap a hint to the effect that his retirement would be graceful and well-timed.

‘If I had served my God’—Slap protested ruefully that night at his club—‘with half the zeal that I have served the Whigs, I should not be in the confounded plight I am ; discarded, sir, deserted by a pack of cowards ; deserted, by Jove ! with a shameless ingratitude that makes one sick to think of.’

‘Never mind,’ cried Scamperly, with a provoking air of pity ; ‘they are a traitorous lot. I wonder who is to have the Pumps and Fountains?’

‘Piffington,’ said somebody, looking up from that evening’s ‘Globe.’ ‘His address to his constituents is out already.’

‘Piffington!’ cried Slap, in a tone of wrath, vengeance, and humiliation, that argued ill for the tranquillity of his successor — ‘Piffington!’

‘Yes,’ said his informant. ‘He has been doing very well at the Dockyards. His reply about

pickled cucumbers, the last navy supply night, was first-rate.'

'Deuced clever fellow,' observed his neighbour.

'Clever!' cried Slap, by this time in a rage, and bursting into the most contemptuous laugh. 'I wish the Ministry joy of him. I wish the House joy, and the Pumps and Fountains; the merest drudge, sir, that ever came out of a clerk's office, or tied up a bundle of rubbish, with red tape. Ministers are waterlogged as it is: with Piffington on board, I'll back them to sink at once, and, by Jove! I hope they will.'

'Coriolanus will join the Volsci, you will see,' a bystander said, as the ex-official walked away. 'Before the Session is over Slap will be in Opposition.'

The House met, Mr. Piffington came down with a new despatch-box, and a heap of beautifully-arranged papers; and gave the most unanswerable replies to all objections. Slap, with a truculent air of defiance, and strong in the consciousness of slighted worth, took up his position below the gangway, and endured, with what stoicism he might, the slights of enemies, the apologies of his recent companions, and the sympathies of officious friends. The First Lord

looked at him, and shuddered as he looked; for that sarcastic mouth, eager and fiery eye, - and energetic frame, bespoke no contemptible antagonist, and an antagonist Slap would, experience warned him, only too certainly become. Meanwhile the fallen statesman 'judicious drank, and greatly daring dined,' haunted ministerial staircases, laughed, listened, and talked, as if all were still peace, and no dark scheme of retaliation were revolving in his breast. Ministers thought that they were well out of a scrape; the public were content; the Pumps and Fountains worked with admirable regularity. Piffington spoke better night by night, and Slap was considered to have shown an almost mean resignation in submitting so tranquilly to the ignominious position of scapegoat of the party.

Alas for human short-sightedness! A month had hardly passed, when Slap began to show symptoms of restlessness; an awful rumour spread through the ministerial ranks that their abandoned friend had a subject in hand. The Government shook in their shoes when he looked their way. Piffington, in the middle of one of his most flowing periods, began to boggle and hesitate, for he knew that Slap's cold cruel eye

was upon him, and that sooner or later the doom would fall. In vain the Duchess of Pondercast asked him and Mrs. Slap, with the most flattering regularity, to her repasts; in vain the Colonial Secretary implored him to accept a Chief Commissionership in the Archipelago; in vain the evening papers suggested that if Mr. Slap, with all his abilities, did not mind what he was about, he would embroil himself still more completely with his employers, and damn his chance of advancement in *infinitum*. Threats, dinners, blandishments, were alike ineffectual against the *robur et æs triplex* of Slap's outraged feelings. At last he rose, and with him the spirits of the Opposition. First came some insignificant enquiries, mere feelers as to the spirit in which his grand assault would be received.

‘Did his right honourable friend know,’ he casually asked one night, ‘why the two nymphs had not been put up in the Strand, and could anybody say where they were?’

Mr. Piffington had not the least idea, but promised to enquire. Next day he had to announce, amid the ironical cheers of the Opposition, that they had been wrapped up in brown

paper, and stowed away in the lumber-room at the Pumps and Fountains, and that orders had been given to have them forthwith prepared for public use.

‘What,’ enquired some dissatisfied economist, who was always moving heaven and earth to cut the estimates down by half a crown, ‘what did “prepared for public use” mean, and was the process an expensive one?’ And then Piffington, who was a modest man, began to blush worse than ever, and had to explain that, in deference to a generally expressed wish, the classical *deshabille* of the statues was to be supplemented by some adventitious drapery, and that the nymphs, when they did appear, would be arrayed in togas.

‘In plaster of Paris togas!’ Slap exclaimed, and then the House knew that the orator had hit upon a congenial theme, and that they were to be regaled for half an hour at least, at Piffington’s expense. Loud and frequent rose the laughs; bolder and racier grew the triumphant speaker’s *facetiae*; darker, and graver, and longer, the face of the agonised Piffington.

The news that Slap was on his legs spread through the House, and was telegraphed to the

clubs; and the smoking-room was deserted, and the galleries began to fill. The wretched official knew that all London was laughing at his discomfiture; not one of his colleagues would stir to his relief; the First Lord, who could have put down Slap if he had chosen, sat in silent amusement, chuckled from time to time at the best hits, and looked cheerfully at his subordinate to see how he liked it. Nobody cared in the least about the nymphs, everybody was glad of a laugh, the Opposition were delighted to see Ministers assailed; and Slap went to bed that night sated with pleasurable revenge, and with the joyful consciousness that he had made Piffington and Piffington's employers look extremely foolish.

At the next Cabinet Council Slap's dismissal was discussed, and more than one noble lord began to think that they had been mistaken. Before long the full gravity of the mistake made itself apparent. Slap had not been working at statistics, diving into blue-books, making unexplained visits into unknown localities, having appointments with the strangest and most unattractive people—in short, leading the life of a slave—for nothing. All this had been the mere

loading 'of his blunderbuss; and just as the season reached its height, he brought it leisurely to the aim, and fired it off with the utmost composure in the face of Her Majesty's advisers. The Duke of Pondercast gave a groan of horror when he read one morning that Slap had given notice to move for a select committee upon the Royal Boilers. It was to be a great speech, every one knew, and long, and circumstantial, and brilliant, and telling, and everything else disagreeable that Slap could make it. Everybody who knew anything wrong about the Royal Boilers, came and poured it into Slap's ear, and received a hearty welcome. Everybody who had a grievance (and there were few people who had *not* a grievance in some way or other connected with the Royal Boilers) knew that the hour of doom had struck, and that the whole system of State-boiling was likely to receive its *coup de grâce* forthwith. Upon no subject was there deeper prejudice or more complete variety of opinion—upon no subject was the public more sensitive, or the Government full of more reasonable apprehensions. Whigs and Tories bandied it about among themselves, both parties too much afraid either to meddle with it or to leave it alone. A

succession of peace-loving ministers had spent their lives in ingenious experiments to shirk its settlement from their own shoulders to those of their successors. The Duke of Pondercast was haunted by it in his dreams. ‘Après nous,’ he used to exclaim, ‘the Royal Boilers!’ But the evil day came quicker than he thought, and his Grace was doomed to be still alive and flourishing on the night when Slap brought on his motion. There was the greatest interest in the House: the Speaker’s gallery was besieged—the ladies fluttered anxiously from behind their grille—deputation after deputation from various State-boiling Departments arrived in town, and thronged the ministers’ door with entreaties, promises, and encouragement. There were other deputations from desperate people, who wanted to do away with State-boiling altogether, and demonstrated with horrible distinctness that the Royal Boilers were a monstrous sham. Then there were meddlesome, suggestive people, ‘the tinkerers,’ as their enemies called them, who said that the Boilers would do well enough, if they were relined and copper-bottomed; and obstinate Conservatives, who maintained that the Boilers were a triumph of statesmanship,

and were working, and always would work, to perfection. Lastly, there was a nervous-class, which thought that interference with the Boilers was only a first step toward the destruction of the empire; and frightened spinsters, in a paroxysm of trepidation, rallied their adherents with a no less terrifying cry than 'The British tea-kettle in danger!'

Into this troubled sea Slap calmly steered his course, and obliged his treacherous friends to follow. No wonder that the Duke had a sudden attack of gout—no wonder that all Slap's friends wrote to expostulate and to implore him even now to withdraw—no wonder that two extraordinary Cabinet Councils were convened, and that from the First Lord downwards, every servant of the Crown heartily wished Slap back at the Pumps and Fountains, or inside one of the Royal Furnaces, or in any other hot disagreeable place. Nothing could be too bad for a man who refused to leave the State Boilers to themselves.

The inferior business of the evening was disposed of, and Mr. Slap, with a formidable array of notes in his hand, arose for the fulfilment of his long-talked-of enterprise—the Achilles of the

British Senate, whose bitter wrath friends and foes alike were now to feel.

‘See,’ said an Opposition onlooker, as Slap cleared his throat, and swept his eye in triumph across the Ministerial benches—

Glittering he stands before th’ assembled host,
Pale Troy beholds, and seems already lost.

The First Lord, at any-rate, settled himself firmly in his seat, pulled his hat over his brow, and resolved, with a smothered anathema at Slap, that it was all up with the State Boilers.

The orator first laid a tremendous substratum of fact, and every fact told with cruel effect upon the doomed institution. He gave instances of Boilers with large holes in them, and Boilers with the wrong sorts of pistons, and Boilers whose constant explosions were the terror of the neighbourhood, and Boilers that worked the wrong way, and Boilers that would not work at all, and infirm Boilers, and extravagant Boilers, and superfluous Boilers; and then he asked with the air of a man sure of his position, Did his right honourable friends, in face of such figures as these, intend to refuse him a committee? The Government certainly *did* intend, and not a man of them looked in the least convinced; but insubordinate

murmurs were heard around, and the applause at each new fact grew louder and more assured. But when Slap, gathering strength as he went, passed on to the comic part of the performance—when he dragged a host of laughable abuses to the light, each in all the nakedness of unexpected exposure, and showed that, take them from what point of view you would, the Boilers were simply a mass of absurdities—then it was that cheers became no longer perilous, and secret sympathy discarded all restraint: even the First Lord was heard to chuckle; and Mr. Multiple, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who owed the department a private grudge for the half million it had added that session to his estimates, threw aside the veil of decent reticence, and burst into an approving laugh.

Slap had been at the trouble of mastering the biographies of some of the principal Boilers from cradle to grave, and very foolish he contrived to make them look. In the first place, he said, there were several which refused, on the ground he supposed of being State engines, to use the water ordinarily supplied for such purposes, but ejected it with every symptom of contemptuous disgust. Several thousands a year, he

pointed out, were spent in providing an acceptable fluid. Kings of Persia used to have their water from the Euphrates; but, after all, water was water; and caprices like this, though excusable in an Eastern despot, were unknown in any branch of the mechanical world except the Royal Boilers. Then did the house know what repairing these precious machines cost a year? It was something beyond belief. Here was an item: eighteen thousand pounds for wash-leather—used, Mr. Slap supposed, for polishing. A Royal Boiler must of course be exceptionally bright; and he only wished they would infect Royal Boiler officials! Fifty thousand pounds for sponges and oil; one hundred tons of copper-headed nails, enough for the coffins of the whole department; rag, lint, and diachylon plaster for the people whom the engines burst against and killed—or was it for the decrepit engines?—a couple of thousand: Grease—and Mr. Slap delivered this word with all the dignified emphasis of Lord Chatham's celebrated exclamation, 'Sugar!'—Grease, sir, seventeen hundred pounds twelve and twopence! Was ever such a potent of insatiability!—oil, wash-leather, nails, rags—goodness knows how many other hundred good things

beside — thrown into the greedy jaws of a single incapable department, and still the Royal Boilers clamouring, like *Oliver Twist* at his second help of rice-pudding, for more. How was the House to face the country—how was any honourable member to confront his supporters—(and, observed Slap, pleasantly, that wholesome meeting could not much longer be deferred)—how was his right honourable friend the member for Flatborough — (Mr. Piffington, in spite of himself, gave a wriggle in his seat)—to venture into that enlightened constituency, and to pretend, while such extravagances as these passed unchallenged, to be struggling for economical retrenchment? For one, he, Mr. Slap, dare not, could not, and, as a man of honour, would not do it; and therefore it was, he solemnly assured the House, that oppressed by the consciousness of incompetence, but driven forward by an irresistible sense of public duty—therefore it was that he had most reluctantly—*how* reluctantly he left his right honourable friends to imagine — been induced to bring forward his motion for enquiry.

The House seemed incredulous and impatient, for Slap's serious passages were considered slow, and people who had come to be amused had no

notion of being preached at. The orator accordingly took a new direction. After all, he said, the great question was, What did they boil? With all the nails, and wash-leather, and diachylon, what was the result? Infinitesimal, Mr. Slap assured the House—a quantity small by degrees and beautifully less session by session, and hurrying by rapid gradations to its vanishing point. The Royal Boilers were unpopular. Slap himself had presented twenty-two petitions against them—and why? Because they were an outrage upon common sense. In one place actually there was nothing done, except that the little boys got their potatoes cooked at the country's expense; in another the Boiler's chimney had been very properly indicted as a nuisance; in a third was an engine which, not content with the ordinary diet of nails, oil, wash-leather, had torn off a man's arm, scalded a baby, crushed two lads to a jelly, and then, in a fit of remorse or despair, wound up its career by bursting to pieces, and blowing in all the windows within a quarter of a mile of its abode. Did the House wish this homicidal Boiler to be retained in the public employ, permitted to infringe the sixth commandment at discretion, and stimulated by official supplies

of nails, oil, and wash-leather for fresh exertions in its career of destructiveness? Then Mr. Slap passed on to the staff, which in the State Boiler Department was a notoriously healthy specimen of the finest jobbing period of our history. If there was an old woman in the three kingdoms, he, or rather she — or, to avoid unpleasantness, suppose he said *it* — was sure to be found in the precincts of the Boilers. These worthy old beings seemed mightily outraged at his figures; but the fault was not Slap's, but the multiplication table's. They reminded him of the gentleman in Pope, no doubt himself a Royal Boiler official, in tearful protestations—

Am I now threescore?

And why, ye gods, should two and two make four?

The laws of arithmetic were inflexible, and the Royal Boiler accounts were, Mr. Slap declared, little short of scandalous. And who could wonder? The chief functionaries of the department, who knew what a smell the Boilers made, how little work they did, how likely they were to burst, took good care to come near them as little as possible. The Head Inspectorship, worth 1,500*l.*, was a simple sinecure; and as the excellent gentleman who held it, had never left his bed, Mr. Slap believed,

since steam was introduced, it was just as well that it was. Then there were Deputy Inspectors, and assistant secretaries, and several offices of clerks, and boards of examiners, and checks, and counter-checks, and all the apparatus of a busy branch of the executive, and all, Mr. Slap solemnly declared, as far as he could make out, doing precisely nil. He proved that everybody connected with the office was also connected with the Head Inspector. The secretaries were sons, sons-in-law, and cousins; the porters were his retired footmen; the head clerk was a bankrupt relation—a bankrupt relation, Slap repeated solemnly—‘and though I would not breathe a word against that gentleman’s respectability, still where national nails, oil, wash-leather, &c., on this enormous scale are concerned, the confidence of the public ought to be encouraged. The clerk of the Royal Boilers, like the wife of Cæsar, ought to be above suspicion.’

Now the State Boiler Office was extremely well connected. The head clerk’s wife gave excellent balls, and this part of Slap’s speech was by no means a success. There were coughs and question, ‘ohs,’ and other unequivocal symptoms of displeasure. Directly he sat down the First Lord, who for the last half-hour had seemed asleep, sprang up, and

soon convinced the House that he had never been wider awake in his life. He began by rebutting the cruel, the scandalously unjust rumour as to the head clerk's bankruptcy. His honourable friend, he said, looking fiercely at Slap, had been entirely misinformed. The gentleman who had for years past discharged the office of head clerk with a fidelity, zeal, and perseverance which might advantageously be imitated in every branch of the service—that gentleman had never been a bankrupt, had never been in business, was the possessor of a large private income, and on every ground alike entitled to the confidence of his employers. Then the Head Inspectorship, so far from being a sinecure, required a very special combination of qualifications, and the present occupier of the post was undeniably the fittest man for it in the kingdom. For a few months he had been confined to the house; but his labours were unremitting, and his instructions—if the honourable member had taken the trouble to read them—perfect models of administrative sagacity. The honourable member, he said, had come to a great question in a spirit of promiscuous mischief-making, like the Irishman who went into Donnybrook fair with his shillelagh, trusting in God that he should hit the right man:

the honourable member was resolved to hit some one, and apparently did not care much whom ; but he should not, in common prudence, have hit himself. And then the Minister good-naturedly pointed out that the accounts of which Slap complained had been transferred to the Royal Boiler Office from the Pumps and Fountains, and had in reality been drawn up under what ought to have been his own supervision. Next, as to the work done, there was really an extraordinary misapprehension. The amount of public boiling was enormous. The figures did not appear in the columns on which the honourable mover's calculations were based, because, for convenience-sake, they were entered under another heading ; but that the Boilers worked well—that they worked economically—that State-boiling in general was a great national blessing—that to grant a committee at that period of the session would be only to rekindle a hundred expiring animosities—that if the State Boilers went, a great deal more would soon follow in their train—that honourable gentlemen opposite had better mind what they were about, before they committed themselves to a revolutionary project—all these, and a great many other wholesome political doctrines, the Minister enunciated, and

the House of Commons received, and Slap felt a horrible consciousness that he was a ruined man.

Then the leader of the Opposition got up, and implied that, though Slap had made out his case so far as the irregularities of the Government were concerned, and though the Head Inspector, like other recent appointments, was all that his worst enemies could paint him, and though the reforms instituted by his colleagues when in office had been wantonly, negligently, criminally set aside, yet that such was Conservative chivalry—such the awe felt on that side of the House for the sacred fabric of the Constitution—such his desire to meet his honourable friends opposite in a spirit of frankness, loyalty, and consideration, that he intended to take a neutral course, and that though he could not vote against the motion, he strongly urged Slap to withdraw it. This heroic forbearance, however, did not preclude him from being extremely sarcastic at the expense both of his present antagonist and his destined ally. He drew a graphic picture of Slap as the conquered Bull in the ‘Georgics,’ driven by the victorious Piffington from the hereditary stalls, nursing his anger, and preparing in solitary meditation the vengeance due to his rejected love—

Victus abit longeque ignotis exulat oris,
Multa gemens ignominiam, plagasque superbi
Victoris, tum quos amisit inultus amores.

He congratulated him on the sudden sharp-sightedness of non-official life, the mere first-fruits of that enlarged political vision which would, he assured Slap, be the inevitable result of a transferred allegiance. Then he gave an account of the mingled alarm and amusement produced in his own rural neighbourhood by the recent erection of a State Boiler, and compared it to the Trojan horse being dragged into the city—‘scandit fatalis machina muros, Foeta armis, pueri circum innuptæque puellæ’—all the little ragamuffins of the country in a frenzy of excitement, peering into the mysterious contrivance; all the old women frightened into fits by its whistle; the parson of the parish protesting against State-boiling upon Sundays; the Squire in horror at an influx of Radical stokers; the farm-boys seduced from bird-scaring, and labourers’ wages going up twopence a week. On the whole, however, the Opposition was unfavourable to the enquiry; and Mr. Slap, consoling himself with a solemn protest that he would bring it on early next session, consented to let his motion drop. In the following week

‘Punch’ had a big picture with Slap and his confederates as the witches in ‘Macbeth,’ and a State Boiler in due process of magical fermentation:—

1st Witch.

Round about the cauldron go,
In the nice statistics throw.

2nd Witch.

Facts that Slap’s inventive brain
Conjures from the vasty main;
Figures, ranged with neatest skill;
Puns enough to make you ill.

3rd Witch.

Air of candour artificial,
Liver of an ex-official;
Tooth of malice, envy’s eye,
Half a frightened Ministry.

1st Witch.

Lips inured to loyal phrase,
Fingers itching for a place.

2nd Witch.

Innuendoes, gossip, sneers,
Lively Opposition cheers.

3rd Witch.

Hints of scandal understood—
Now the charm is firm and good.

All.

Double, double, vain the trouble
Of the great State Boiler bubble!

With a copy of this ‘Punch’ in his pocket,
Mr. Slap, who liked a joke, even at his own

expense better than none, and was rather flattered than otherwise by the caricature of himself, took his place for Sandyford next day, resolved upon enjoying a well-earned holiday at Clyffe, and accepting the general invitation—for which as a sharer in the Christmas theatricals he had come in—to be present at the ceremonial of Charles's wedding. He and Malagrida went down together, and were in the middle of a hot political discussion when the train drew up at Sandyford, and they found the Clyffe break awaiting their arrival. Both gentlemen piqued themselves on their taste, and came provided with handsome offerings for the bride. Malagrida especially had sent to Rome for an antique necklace, the quaint massive costliness of which would have done credit to a royal collection. Nelly's heart throbbed as she opened the casket; she fled with the treasure to her bedroom, and Margaret found her, rapt in delight, before a mirror. Half flushed with satisfaction, half blushing to be detected, she started in confusion as her sister's voice recalled her to herself. To Margaret it seemed as though the picture of childish loveliness could hardly be surpassed: the eye beaming with satisfaction; the glowing cheek; the pretty gesture of surprise; the natural guile-

less vanity; the playfulness of a half-frightened, gentle, tender creature, compounded of sunshine, and smiles, and laughter—exempt from the common burthen of her kind—a stranger to serious emotion, or the possibility of a gloomy mood. What wonder that wherever she went people began to pet her? How natural that Charles in this sunshiny presence should forget a less spirit-stirring sentiment—a less light-hearted companion—the scarcely-hinted vows of a soberer passion, and yield himself to the infection of merriment with a joyful recklessness: how natural—and, added a sterner voice, to which Margaret, even in her secret thoughts, did not choose to give a hearing—how base!

Charles meanwhile was in full enjoyment of a smooth and unlaborious courtship. Conscience, which a hundred times had shouted 'Traitor!' in his ear, whispered now but in intermittent and enfeebled tones. The idea of desertion, at first terribly oppressive, had been gradually banished from his thoughts, and seemed day by day more entirely incredible. Margaret's demeanour—frank, business-like, active—suggested no suspicion of distress. She was busy about her sister's plans, held cabinet councils with dressmakers and

confectioners, discussed with her grandfather the list of relations to be invited, the procession to church, and the details of the wedding breakfast; and went with the utmost contentment to town for long days of shopping, which Nelly's exacting taste and numberless caprices would have made a martyrdom to all but the most forbearing companion. Nobody could possibly look less love-lorn or sentimental; and Charles, reassured by her appearance, banished the last lingering misgiving, and threw himself without compunction into the privileged enjoyments of a man who was at once young, rich, prosperous, a welcome lover and an acknowledged heir. He lifted the cup to his lips—sweet, sparkling, rose-crowned—drank, and drank again, and set it down at last, startled to find himself less pleasure-intoxicated than he had hoped. The society of his future wife cost him no effort, and it yielded him enjoyment, but not so intense, so poignant, so soul-stirring a sensation as lovers are traditionally supposed to feel, and as Charles's boy-dreams had pictured for himself. Was it then an overdrawn style, a mere poetical exaggeration, the conventional extravagance of novelists and poets, that shaped those high-flown phrases of passion stronger than death

itself, of devotion for which the common round of life scarcely gave scope enough—of souls so firmly linked, so interpenetrated with mutual love, so nicely adjusted in every fibre of their being, that henceforth to divide was to annihilate, and two existences seemed, in more than a metaphorical sense, to be merged in one? He read over his old favourite love-songs, and found them insupportably hyperbolical—

À ses moindres discours suspendre tout son être,
Ému d'un doux espoir,
Et mourir tout le jour, hélas, à se promettre
Un sourire le soir—

Prettily sentimental, Charles thought to himself, but morbid surely; well enough from a theatrical Frenchman to his mistress; but simply foolish in the mouth of a sober English husband. Nelly's smiles were to be had morning, noon, and night, and had not, thank goodness, to be paid for in sighs. As for hanging on her lips in fond expectancy to catch the precious accents as they fell, Charles burst out laughing at the idea. They were dear little lips, cherry bright, and made for kissing; but they talked the most dreadful rubbish, pouted whenever their proprietress had not exactly what she wished, and were quite undeserving of any rapturous enthusiasm. One

evening the pretty lips were employed in singing ; and an air, at which for several mornings she had been hard at work, for the first time produced. Nelly sang it cheerfully through, bending every faculty, it seemed, to avoid an ever-impending break-down.

Ask me no more ; thy fate and mine are sealed ;
I strove against the stream, and all in vain :
Let the great river take me to the main ;
No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield—
Ask me no more.

‘ There ! ’ Nelly said, jumping up with glee from her accomplished task, ‘ ask me no more ! And why do you smile, Margaret ? Was it not all right ? ’

‘ All quite right,’ her sister said, laughing ; ‘ but what made you choose such a sentimental song as that ? ’

‘ Oh,’ Nelly said, gravely, ‘ I like the sentimental ones, because of the slow time ; the fast accompaniments distract me.’

Thereupon Charles burst out laughing too, and somehow Nelly felt that her new song had not been as successful as it deserved. And then the young lovers went away into the library for a *tête-à-tête*, and Charles made Nelly go and fetch a new bonnet, with pink roses, which had arrived

that day, which Nelly was very glad to do; and they discussed the precise tinge of the pink, and the position of the roses, and Charles grew so impertinent that Nelly crumpled up the silver paper from the bonnet-box into a large ball, and threw it at him; and then, peace having been proclaimed, and solemnised with a kiss, they passed on to furniture, and the rent of a house in Chester Square, and how much a good cook ought to have for wages, and whether they would go to a great many balls their first summer in London, and so came back at last into the drawing-room thoroughly satisfied with existence and themselves — Charles with the conviction that an hour's love-making was no bad expedient for whiling away an idle evening; and Nelly, with the pink bonnet still fluttering before her mind's eye, to be haunted by visions of a matrimonial Elysium, in which the deliciousness of a *trousseau* was the uppermost idea, and her future lord and master held only a subordinate place, or sometimes even, could Nelly but have known it, scarcely found a place at all.

To Margaret, as the time for parting drew on, the prospect seemed to darken day by day. The crisis of her misfortune was at hand. She had

thought of it so often, dwelt upon it, prepared herself for the effort, fancied that she had gauged its terrors, and yet it was terrible. How would life look without her old companions? How would the Manor-house seem when the bustle was over, and the lovers gone, and the quiet routine of weeks and months, each just like the last, begun again, and she and her grandfather once more left alone? Blank, cold, wearisome. Her heart died down within her at the sense of tedium which she fancied creeping slowly but irresistibly upon her hour by hour, blotting out an enjoyment, dulling a faculty, robbing existence of a charm. Reason depicted her cousin's character—weak, shallow, variable; but sentiment is eminently unreasonable. Each day's fresh experience gave her new insight into an unsuspected levity, an infirm will, the selfishness of a feeble nature; he was just the man, she resolved, from whom any one, who depended on him for steadfastness, would reap certain disappointment; he would certainly have made her wretched; he would be certain to behave ill—he *had* behaved ill; and yet she loved him.

At the thought of separation, the old feelings overrode the new—the pleasant old days before

love was conscious of itself, or any feeling recognised but simple enjoyment and affection. It is easy to analyse our friends, write them down wanting, condemn them in our heart's tribunal, and register their disloyalty; but when they come to leave us; when the time for reconciliation is over; when, quarrelling or loving, we are to see them no more—does not Reason give her verdict with a faltering voice, and Remorse banish every thought except that they *are* our friends, and that, be their faithlessness what it may, it is agony to part? Margaret found herself struggling with all her might against unhappiness, but her forces were giving way inch by inch, and already wavering for disastrous defeat. She could think of her cousin now only as the tender friend, the pleasant companion of other days, the sharer of common recollections, interests, and pleasures; and already it was half a crime to think of him as anything but as another's husband. Which would be worse, she wondered, the present sharp poignant pang, with the necessity for immediate action, or the dull aching void which must presently succeed—the burthen of a whole disappointed lifetime?

At length the eventful morning arrived, and Nelly—the agonising anxieties of her toilet safely

undergone—in a bewilderment of nervousness, excitement, and delight; smiles, and blushes, and tears following each other in picturesque alternation, like passing clouds across her face—was carried off to church, a pretty victim, white-crowned, glittering, lace-enshrouded from the too curious gaze, and there offered up on the shrine of that matrimonial Moloch to whom year by year so many tender damsels fall a prey. Nothing, Malagrida declared, could be more perfect than her dress, her demeanour, or the pretty tremulous accents in which she made the responses which raised her to the dignity of wife. When they got home, he greeted her with a chivalrous respectful tenderness that Nelly thought extremely flattering, but which, had she known it, contrasted strangely enough with the contemptuous terms in which he and Slap had been all the morning denouncing woman as a sex, and matrimony as an institution.

‘Trop ou trop peu,’ he said, ‘should be the motto of the whole affair — passion, satiety, hatred; show me the man who has travelled the road, and has not stopped at one stage or the other.’

‘Why omit the golden mean?’ objected Slap,

as he thought of the elderly lady who presided over his London establishment; 'the safest relationship is a calm and virtuous indifference; but you Italians are so incorrigibly passionate.'

'And you English,' the Count retorted, 'so incorrigibly virtuous, and love so to talk of it. What think you of Chamfort's alternative, '*Il faut choisir d'aimer les femmes ou de les connaître : il n'y a pas de milieu ?*'

And then the bride approached, and Malagrida prepared his most paternal smile, and was delighted when he heard that they might perhaps meet in their travels.

'You go to Italy?' he cried; 'wise choice indeed—art, scenery, antiquities, all in perfection; religion thoroughly picturesque, society dull, but enjoyable. But remember, I entreat you, my villa at Sorrento, the prettiest position in Christendom. Where, I should like to know, can love-making be achieved, if not in the Bay of Naples?'

An hour later the crowd of guests were gathered round the Manor-house porch, waiting to give the due God-speed! to the life-long journey just about to begin. As the day went on Nelly had become increasingly frightened, and needed all the consolations her friends could offer. It

occurred to her, almost for the first time, how sad it was to be leaving her home, her grandfather, the sister on whom, ever since she could remember, she had relied for sympathy and support. She was vexed, too, at her travelling-dress, which arrived at the very last moment, and was trimmed exactly in the way she most disliked.

‘Did it not,’ she asked Margaret, anxiously, ‘make her look a perfect fright? How provoking it was that people would be always so unpunctual!’

‘Come, come, little fright,’ Margaret said, laughing, ‘you ought to be off in twenty minutes. Charley will think it pretty enough, you may be sure.’

Thereupon ensued a general hurry and confusion which reduced Nelly’s already fluttering wits to simple chaos: a sudden fit of distress at departure, anxiety about her boxes, admonitions to her maid, leave-takings of her sister, a grave benediction from the Squire—kisses, and tears, and solemn words that seemed to fall faintly on her ear; and then all her outward passage thronged with kindly forms, dimly seen through her tears, the familiar faces dear from childhood upwards, pleasant friends and faithful servants, and the old nurse, delighted with her darling’s prosperity—

all eyes bent upon her with tenderness, interest, and hearty good wishes, and loving hands stretched eagerly to grasp her own; and then—a crowd of hurrahing boys and men—a whirr of wheels—a crash of church-bells, and once more the last unheard ‘Good-bye!’ and then all was over, and she was alone with her husband; and Charles, as the carriage turned, looked back on his home, and saw Margaret standing at the door, looking after them with wistful, solemn, melancholy eyes, which not all the excitement of the occasion enabled him to forget, and which cast a little shade of dissatisfaction over the first journey of his honeymoon.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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